THE LAMP OF LOVE

Journeying with the Sabri Brothers

AMATULLAH ARMSTRONG CHISHTI

The Mazar of Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya Mehboob Ilahi in Delhi, India.

'Light the Lamp of Love in the darkness of my heart, ya Khwaja!'

* * * *

For the Love of

Khwaja Mu'inuddin Chishti
Hazrat Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki
Baba Fariduddin Ganj-i-Shakar
Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya Mehboob Ilahi
and
my Pir-O-Murshid Baba 'Abdul Razzaq Raza Shakoori Chishti

* * * *

With love, honour and respect
to the dervish qawwal
Mehmood Ghaznavi Sabri

* * * *

This book is dedicated to

Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri

&

The Sabri Brothers

1984. Wind sweeps gently over desert sands, the sound of serenity and mystery. At my feet tiny stunted plants sway quietly in the joy of surrender to the hardships of their existence. In the stillness of this Saharan majesty I sit contemplating a faraway goatherd with his flock. Quranic image. Timeless beauty. Perfect miniature. Pure simplicity. Yearning to merge into, become one with the eternal moment, my eyes fill with salty tears. Silence overwhelms. A limitless sky of luminous sapphire descends and enters my heart. The rapture!

* * * *

1999. Squeezed in between the musicians. I cannot move. My knees are jammed tightly against my chest. My entire body pulsates in rhythm with the beats of the dholak. I am surrounded by thousands of devotees exalting in appreciation, dancing in ecstasy, sitting reverently or silently weeping as the Sabri Brothers sing each couplet of Sufi poetry. For a few precious moments we all seem to fuse and blend into the joyous unity of the celebration. In front of us the doors of the Shrine of Khwaja Mu'inuddin Chishti glisten with reflected lights. I am carried on a great wave of devotional love.

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Expressions of yearning. Aspects of love. Faces of *Tasawwuf*.

Contents

		page
	Acknowledgements	xi
	Introduction by Omid Safi	xiii
	Preface	xvii
	Foreword	xix
	— THE STORY —	
1.	'In pre-Eternity there were hosts of souls'	3
2.	'A major landmark has been reached'	6
3.	A book, a search and a fax	11
4.	The Boat and the Ocean	17
5.	'Allah manifested you in Australia but....'	25
6.	Full Circle to 'Abdullah Shah Ghazi Baba	37
7.	'I will keep her heart with me....'	51
8.	'There's no cure but the taste of what the saints pass round'	60
9.	Contemplations of a Traveller	75
10.	India: 'Light the lamp of Love in the darkness of my heart'	84
11.	Scattered Pictures of Pakistan	118
12.	'You are a Chishti!'	129
	Glossary	140
	Bibliography	145

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Introduction

Ours is a strange world. Much has been said about the era of neoliberal capitalism, the rampant spread of globalisation which perpetuates secularisation, devastation of the environment, oppression of workers who live far below the poverty line, the 'North/South' division, destruction of traditional cultures, etc. All of this is true, and many activists, whether Muslim or not, are fighting to resist this overpowering system and to come up with fair and just alternatives. Ironically, the same process of globalisation also means that more people today all around the world have come to conceive of themselves as inhabitants of one planet, drawing upon one reservoir of natural resources. This is also true in more subtle realms, like spirituality and music. Musically we see examples where Sting jams with Algerian rai musicians, where Peter Gabriel has been responsible for introducing much of Sufi music to the West. The transmission of culture and spiritual insights do not flow in a unilateral direction today, but whirl around the world like a dervish, connecting the East and the West, North and the South.

My own introduction to the Sufi context of the Sabri Brothers, who are the major focus of this book, is ironically indebted to that same process of globalisation, with all of its cruel ugliness and surprising (and no doubt unintended) beauties. Some years ago, when living in North Carolina, I lived with two kindred souls, both spiritually advanced Sufis who were deeply immersed in the South Asian aesthetic of Islam. It was my first introduction to Qawwali, and a revelation indeed from the realm of the spirit after my previous experiences largely with Persian and Turkish Sufi music. An American convert to Islam, a dear Sufi friend named Mahmud, had years before played the Sabri Brothers' meditation on the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), titled 'Habib' (Beloved). It was an enchanting song, culminating in:

ya sahib al-jamal wa ya zinat al-bashar...
O possessor of beauty
O adornment of creation

After that, I sought some more Qawwali music, and immersed myself in the music of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and others. But my heart kept seeking the Sabris. Some years later, I found the third volume of the 'Greatest Hits' of the Sabri Brothers, and in it I came across a magical poem:

Ya Muhammad Nur-e Mojassam
O Muhammad, embodied light.

Tasvir-e kamal-e muhabbat
Tanvir-e jamal-e khoda-yi
You,
Image of love's perfection
You,
illumination of God's beauty.

Afaq-ha gardidam
mehr-e botan varzidam
besyar khooban didam
laken to chiz-e digari

I searched from horizon to horizon
I sought the love of all the idol-beloveds
I saw many beautiful ones
But you, Muhammad...
you are something else!

This was the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) that I know, the Muhammad of devotional life, reflected in a song: the Prophet who was the *rahmat al-'alamin* (Mercy for all universes), the one for whom God created the Heavens and the Earth (*la lawka*...). Here was a powerful demonstration of how the popular tradition of veneration for the Prophet (so beautifully documented in Annemarie Schimmel's *And Muhammad Is His Messenger*) was still being transmitted today through the Sufi music of Sabri Brothers and others.

Like the classical lovers who fall in love at one glance, and yearn for more, I too kept seeking more music that spoke to the heart like this. Something that was rooted in the beautiful Sufi tradition, and reminded one of our Eternal Home and Destination. One day when I was in a music store in North Carolina, I saw the new CD by the Sabri Brothers, called 'Ya Mustapha'. I remember putting the headphones on, and hearing:

hasbi rabbi jal Allah
ma fi qalbi ghayr Allah
Nur Muhammad salla Allah
Haqq! La ilaha illa Allah

My sustaining lord suffices me
Glory be to God!
There is no room in my heart
except for God!
Blessed be the Light of Muhammad...
Truth! There is no deity except God!

The refrain is a familiar Arabic one that I had heard in many Sufi gatherings from India to Turkey and Egypt, unto North America. Yet here was the chorus of a song, being recited with passion and beauty by the Sabri Brothers. Each time it was sung, it resonated more and more in my heart, and I felt the rust of forgetfulness being knocked down. And there, in the midst of a music store, there were tears streaming down my face (to the slight amusement of the quite hip patrons of the store!). I remember grabbing the CD, paying for it quickly, and rushing home where I could listen to its healing words over and over again.

The Qawwali tradition of South Asia is a magnificent spiritual treasure for all Muslims. It brings together, in a beautiful manner, the Indo-Persian Sufi tradition, the courtly refinement of Indian music, and the poetry tradition of Persian, Urdu, Punjabi, and local vernaculars. With the exception of the Mevlevi (Mawlawiyya) order in Turkey and beyond, no other Sufi Tariqa (spiritual order) has made such extensive use of music than the Chishtis of South Asia. The music of the Sabri Brothers, which figures so prominently in this wonderful memoir by Amatullah Armstrong Chishti, unfolds from the very heart of that Chishti tradition.

Jurists and Sufis have carried on a thousand-year-old debate about the propriety of music in an Islamic context. Some jurists have declared all of it *haram* (forbidden), others have adopted a more careful approach that bases the verdict on the heart of the one who hears the music. This is indeed the opinion of the famed theologian al-Ghazali (d. 1111) who concludes that music brings out in the heart of one whose heart has been purified, a yearning for God, and in the heart of one who is ruled by *nafs* (ego-self, carnal self) merely more ego and more passions. It is for that reason that historically speaking Sufis have

always insisted that music as sublime as this should be played in the *khanaqah* (Sufi lodge) or *dargah* (Sufi shrine), where one could also receive guidance from a Sufi master to purify one's heart.

The music of the Sabri Brothers can be a powerful spiritual tool for aspirants on the Sufi path. There is no one magical key for unlocking the treasures of the heart that are hidden in every soul, but a music that reminds one of the Divine, one that evokes a sense of ecstasy (wajd) rooted not in passions of the carnal self but the joyous ecstasy of union with the Eternal Beloved is a powerful tool. May each reader who is a seeker (talib) be fortunate enough to find a Sufi community in which she or he can find authentic and transformative instructions on the path back to the Divine.

wa ilayhi raji'un,
and we are perpetually returning to God...

OMID SAFI*

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Preface

'This is the Lady who is going to write the book about me'

I never met the great Pakistani qawwal, Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri, in this world. Yet he came to me in many dreams and in one dream he told me to write a book. It happened like this.

It was a cool August morning in 1997. I had just offered the dawn prayer in our tenth floor apartment. The northern Australian city of Brisbane was still and tranquil at that mystical hour of the day, when receptive hearts are opened in readiness to receive whatever may be sent from the Realm of Imagination. I fell asleep and saw a dream.

I am standing in an empty space. I can hear the voice of Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri but I cannot see him. I can only hear his deep voice. I can see Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's face. Haji Saheb says to Nusrat, 'This is the lady who is going to write the book about me'. Very slowly and with great consideration Nusrat scrutinizes my face. He looks straight into my eyes and then, with a gentle smile, nods his head in approval, indicating that I am the one who must write this book.

Emerging from the mists of my dream I awoke and entered the day. Within only an hour or two I received a phone call from a friend. He told me the sad news that Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, another famous Pakistani qawwal, had passed away in London only a few hours earlier. The veils were removed from my dream. Now it stood out in sharp clarity, revealing its message. Not only did the dream inform me of the book that had been assigned to me; it also brought direct news of Nusrat's death, immediately after it had happened. At the time of seeing the dream Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan had just joined Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri in the spiritual realm. The two great divinely inspired qawwals were together and I was the lady to whom a book had been given!

* * * *

This is not a biography of Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri and his brothers. It has never been my intention to write their life story. And this is not a book about music either. So vast is the ocean of classical Indian music that I dare not venture past its shoreline. This is simply a story

about being with the Sabri Brothers and being engulfed by their music. It is about the unfolding of a dream and the journey that took me from the midst of an Australian bush land paradise to the rapture of devotion at the Shrines of the Great Chishti Saints in Pakistan and India.

'The Lamp of Love' is one story amongst many such stories of yearning and searching for the Beloved. Every person has a story and every person is a story. This is just one story amongst millions.

Foreword

Music and Sufism (*Tasawwuf*)

Islam has an outer dimension and an inner dimension. Its exoteric or outer dimension, which is the domain of the Sacred Law (*Shari'at*) of the Qur'anic Revelation, is concerned with the attainment of salvation, that is, with the securing for all men a blessed return to Allah. Its esoteric or inner dimension is *Tasawwuf*, known in the West as Sufism. This is the domain of the Spiritual Path (*Tariqa*) of the Qur'anic Revelation and is wholly concerned with the attainment of human perfection, and therefore sanctity, in this life. *Tasawwuf* could be likened to the heart within the body of Islam.

William Stoddart writes, 'Mysticism makes its appearance, as an inward dimension, in every religion, and to attempt to separate the mystical element from the religion which is its outward support is an arbitrary act of violence which cannot but be fatal to the mysticism, or spiritual path, concerned.'

Whilst William C. Chittick states, 'Sufism is simply full and complete actualisation of the faith and practice of Islam. The verified Sufi is the perfect Muslim. To become a Sufi in the true sense is to become a *muwahhid*, one who establishes *tawhid* or asserts the unity of God [Allah], not simply with the tongue, but also with the understanding and the whole being. By this definition, Islam without Sufism is an aberration from the Koranic [Qu'ranic] norm.'

'Sufi ideology is a response to orthodox Islam, at the same time emanating from its very tenets,' says Regula Burckhardt Qureshi. 'Thus while affirming the unity of God (*tawhid*) and the absolute distinction between Creator and created, Sufism also assumes an inner kinship between God and man and strives to bridge the gulf between them through the dynamic force of love (*muhabbat*).'

The Holy Qur'an refers to the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as 'the beautiful model'. *'Verily, in the Messenger of Allah is a beautiful model for those of you that set their hopes on Allah and the Last Day, and remember Allah much'* (The Holy Qur'an 33:2). All Muslims are

urged to model themselves and their lives upon his perfect example. The people of the Sufi Path, that is, those who 'remember Allah much', strive to take this Qur'anic injunction to its utmost limit by endeavouring to adhere to the 'beautiful model' in all aspects of their inner and outer lives.

Following the Holy Prophet's perfect example the Sufi Masters practise various spiritual methods to purify the heart in readiness for the inner encounter with the Divinity. The principle method used within all of the Sufi *Tariqas* is the Invocation or Remembrance of Allah, *zikrullah*. The invocation and glorification of Allah takes place through the repetition of one of His Names, or a phrase in His Glory. In a sacred saying (*Hadith Qudsi*) Allah says, through the Holy Prophet Muhammad, *'I am sitting with the one who remembers Me.'* The entire art of *Tasawwuf* is perfecting the *zikr* so that it becomes perpetual, filling the heart with the uninterrupted music of the *zikr* and thereby placing one, constantly, in the Divine Presence.

The Invocation or Remembrance of Allah, *zikr*, can be undertaken by the initiate either in isolation or under the immediate direction of the Master within a gathering or assembly of other initiates. Specific breathing patterns are central to the effectiveness of the *zikr* and often within the collective *zikr* the practice is intensified and heightened by the accompaniment of rhythmic drumbeats. As the drumbeats change so too does the breathing pattern, and the breath of the invoker then directly affects his heartbeat. The drumbeats become like the outward reverberations of the heartbeats of those who invoke or remember Allah at the gathering.

* * * *

Another spiritual method used within *Tasawwuf* is the audition of music (*sama'*). Although the lawfulness of music has been the subject of long controversy within Islam, the people of the Sufi Path use it as a means of opening the heart to spiritual realities.

William C. Chittick says, 'In some parts of the Islamic world it [music] has remained slightly peripheral because of the understanding of some of the ulama [scholars] that music was prohibited by the Prophet. However, there is no agreement on this prohibition. What the ulema all agree upon is that music has an extremely potent effect upon the soul, and that it can represent both the beautiful (that which reflects

the divine beauty) and the dispersive and fiery (the satanic), not to mention every other human possibility.'

'While *zikr* is sanctioned by the Koran (Sura 33:40 and 13:28), *sama'* has always remained a theologically controversial practice, because the mainstream of Islamic theological opinion has prohibited music as dangerous and unlawful, although no direct prohibition of music is contained in the Koran' writes Regula Burckhardt Qureshi.

Imam al-Ghazali says, 'The heart of man has been so constituted by the Almighty that, like a flint, it contains a hidden fire which is evoked by music and harmony, and renders man beside himself with ecstasy. These harmonies are echoes of that higher world of beauty which we call the world of spirits; they remind man of his relationship to that world, and produce in him an emotion so deep and strange that he himself is powerless to explain it. The effect of music and dancing is deeper in proportion to the natures on which they act are simple and prone to emotion; they fan into a flame whatever love is already dormant in the heart, whether it be earthly and sensual, or divine and spiritual.'

He continues, 'At present we content ourselves with saying that music and dancing do not put into the heart what is not there already, but only fan into a flame dormant emotions. Therefore if a man has in his heart that love to [Allah] which the law enjoins, it is perfectly lawful, nay laudable in him to take part in exercises which promote it. On the other hand, if his heart is full of sensual desires, music and dancing will only increase them, and are therefore unlawful to him. While, if he listens to them merely as a matter of amusement, they are neither lawful nor unlawful, but indifferent. For the mere fact that they are pleasant does not make them unlawful any more than the pleasure of listening to the singing of birds or looking at green grass and running water is unlawful.'

Like all the spiritual methods of self-purification of *Tasawwuf*, *sama'* is a means to an end. It is not the end in itself. The aim of *sama'* is spiritual ecstasy which opens the heart to inrushes of knowledge *(ma'rifat)* of the Divinity. Not every listener at the *sama'* assembly is destined to attain ecstasy. It is all a matter of Divine Grace. Shaykh Ibn al-'Arabi defines 'ecstasy' (*wajd*) as 'the states (*ahwal*) that come upon the heart unexpectedly and annihilate it from witnessing itself and those present.' When such a true ecstasy is experienced the listener may find Allah within that ecstasy.

To quote Imam al-Ghazali again: 'We now come to the purely religious use of music and dancing: such is that of the Sufis, who by this means stir up in themselves greater love towards [Allah], and, by means of music, often obtain spiritual visions and ecstasies, their heart becoming in this condition as clean as silver in the flame of the furnace, and attaining a degree of purity which could never be attained by any amount of mere outward austerities. The Sufi then becomes so keenly aware of his relationship to the spiritual world that he loses consciousness of this world, and often falls down senseless.'

And Shaykh Sharafuddin Maneri says in his *Hundred Letters*, 'Hence it should be known that whoever is overcome in face of love of the Lord, and who yearns to see Him, finds that listening to music is a stimulant that excites his holy desire and serves to further strengthen his love and ardent yearning by bringing it out into the open. Listening brings forth the fire in his breast from its hiding place, and makes it visible in favoured states, by means of clear manifestation and mutual enlightenment. This could not have taken place within the blockaded heart itself. Know that if anyone is destined to experience this grace, and to have these blessings showered upon him, these exalted states, in the language of the Sufis, are referred to as 'ecstatic outpourings'. At this stage, listening to music is lawful—even desirable! Some even say that it is necessary that this step should be taken, for although something may be playful in this world, yet when it reaches the stage of hearing the Lord Himself, it becomes something truly wonderful. How greatly a person is transformed in his essence! Whatever then comes to him will also be transformed.'

Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya said, 'The great spiritual Masters have attended musical assemblies and they are supporters of this activity. For that person who has a taste for Allah and has experienced the pain of separation from Him, hearing one line of poetry can create in him an overwhelming sense of pathos, whether or not musical instruments are used. But as for the person who has never experienced the taste for Allah, even if countless reciters appear before him and play every kind of musical instrument, what use will they be since he is not among the people of pain, that is, he is not among those who experience the pain of separation from Allah? Hence one should note that this activity is connected with pain not with musical instruments or anything else!'

The final word on the permissibility of *sama'* is related by Shaykh Sharafuddin Maneri. The Shaykh relates how the Archangel Gabriel came to the Holy Prophet (PBUH) bringing the good news that, 'The

dervishes of your community will enter paradise five hundred years before the rich.' The Holy Prophet was filled with joy and said, 'Is there anyone present who can recite a poem for the occasion?' A man said, 'Yes, I can, O Messenger of Allah!' He replied, 'Then recite!'

The serpent of love has stung my heart:
There is no physician, and none to administer a charm,
Except that Beloved with whom I am enthralled.
With Him are the charm and the antidote as well!

On hearing this poem the Holy Prophet and his Companions stood up in a state of rapture. So enraptured was the Holy Prophet that his cloak fell from his shoulders. After the ecstasy had subsided he said, 'No one who fails to rejoice when he hears the song of the Friend can possibly be favoured!' The cloak of the Holy Prophet was cut into four hundred pieces and distributed amongst all those present.

Qawwali and the Sabri Brothers

Wherever there are Muslims there are Sufi *Tariqas* and wherever there are Sufi Tariqas there is Sufi music. *Qawwali* is the devotional music of the Sufi *Tariqas* of Pakistan and India. The term *Qawwali* derives from the Arabic word *qaul*, meaning speech or utterance, and is applied to a specific form of Sufi music and also to the occasion of its performance. The q*awwal* is the singer. It is the human voice, the utterance or speech of the *qawwal* himself, in combination with the rhythms of the music, which give *Qawwali* its extraordinary power; a power which can take a receptive listener to the heights of spiritual ecstasy and transform him into one who hears and finds Allah.

The *Qawwali* gathering is an intense form of devotion and worship during which songs of Divine Love addressed to the Beloved are sung in Praise of Allah, the Holy Prophet Muhammad and the Great Sufi Saints. The *qawwals* use the vast treasury of mystical poetry of the Sufi Masters as a vehicle to transport their audience across the bridge from the finite realm to the Infinite realm. This poetry abounds in beautiful and often sensuous imagery of the cup (*paimana*), wine (*sharab*), tavern (*maikhana*), cupbearer (*Saqi*), the candle (*shama*), the moth (*parwana*), the rose (*gul*) and the nightingale (*bulbul*), intoxication, sobriety, lover and Beloved, yearning for mystical union, and the pain

of separation. But this imagery is often misunderstood and misinterpreted by those unfamiliar with the Sufi teaching. For the people of *Tasawwuf* the sensuous always indicates the spiritual. The Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said, 'When you see beautiful women remember the *houris* of the Paradise; and refer yourself from this world to the next, and from the next world refer yourself to Allah, Who is Absolute Beauty.'

The Beloved about whom the *qawwal* sings is always Allah or the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) or one of the Great Saints or the Pir-O-Murshid. The lover is always the devotee on the Sufi Path, the one who yearns for Allah. Intoxication is annihilation of self in Allah. Sobriety is returning to oneself after being absent from oneself in Allah. Wine is the drink of Divine Love. The tavern is the heart of the Saint or Murshid. This imagery is rich and endless.

The voices of the *qawwals* singing their messages of Praise and Divine Love, and the rhythms of the music, which is performed on harmonium, *dholak* and *tabla*, with the accompaniment of hand clapping, are similar to the ceaseless recitation of Divine Names in the Sufi practice of *zikr*. Repetition of short rhythmic phrases of music and lyrics can bring about, in receptive listeners, various spiritual states, ranging from those of the most profound sadness to those of the highest joy and ultimately to the loss of self in the ecstasy of annihilation in the Divinity. *Qawwali* is an art of communication. It is an art of the 'moment', an art of spontaneity, in which the *qawwals* and their musicians must respond, immediately, to the spiritual needs of the audience. The *qawwals* respond to their audience who in turn respond to the *qawwals*, back and forth, an art of communication. Just as *zikr* is a means to reach the goal, so too is *qawwali*. *Qawwali* is not an end in itself. The sublime voices, the mystical poetry and the powerful music are vehicles to carry the 'one who hears' across the bridge to the Infinite Realm of Wonder.

In the sublime words of the greatest lover Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi:

> Don't worry about saving these songs!
> And if one of our instruments breaks,
> it doesn't matter.
>
> We have fallen into the place
> where everything is music.

The strumming and the flute notes
rise into the atmosphere,
and even if the whole world's harp
should burn up, there will still be
hidden instruments playing.

– From *Like This*

* * * *

The Sabri Brothers, Pakistan's highly esteemed and best-loved *qawwals*, are referred to as 'Roving Ambassadors for Pakistan'. For over thirty years they have been inspiring audiences throughout the world, bringing joy, spiritual solace and comfort to all peoples, regardless of race, religion, class, language and culture. Following the great *qawwali* tradition, established over 700 years ago by Hazrat Amir Khusrau in Delhi, today it is the Sabri Brothers who are inspiring many people in foreign lands. The Sufi message of Divine Love, which they carry and deliver through their traditional *qawwali*, is the universal message of generosity, compassion and love of all humanity.
The Sabri Brothers' musical lineage stretches back over centuries and passes down through many generations of great musicians to the time of the Moghul Emperors. They are the direct descendants of the legendary Mian Tansen, the great singer in the Court of Akbar.

Originally there were four Sabri Brothers. The eldest brother, Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri passed away in 1994. A man of immense spirituality, he is considered by many to be a saint. Haji Kamal Sabri, the second eldest brother and a master of the technique *Tan Tarana*, passed away very recently in 2001.

Since their beginning, the Sabri Brothers have been led by Haji Maqbool Ahmed Sabri who was born in Kalyana India in 1945. Founder and Musical Director of the Sabri Brothers, he is an artist of rare genius, having devoted his entire life to music since the tender age of 5. Music is in his blood. But his genius goes far deeper than that. His divinely inspired art is a gift from Allah. Maestro par excellence of classical *qawwali*, Haji Maqbool Ahmed Sabri still leads the group.

The youngest brother, Mehmood Ghaznavi Sabri, was born in Karachi in 1949. An inspired *qawwal* and a true *dervish*, he is now second *qawwal*. Together, Haji Maqbool and Mehmood Ghaznavi continue to enthral their audiences both at home in Pakistan and India,

and abroad, from northern Europe to South Africa, from Morocco to Australia.

Winners of numerous Awards and tireless workers for charity for the poor and oppressed, and for the victims of natural calamities, the Sabri Brothers are true servants of Allah. Not only do they serve Allah, they also serve His humanity. The Sabri Brothers are artists and servants. They are lovers of the Sufis Saints.

The Sabri Brothers' stunning virtuosity and brilliant exposition brings audiences to the heights of amazement and awe, whilst the tremendous power, subtlety, sensitivity and beauty of their voices reaches to the depths of the human heart, speaking in a divine language beyond words. But these techniques of *qawwali* would be nothing but empty virtuosity if the *qawwals* themselves were without faith and unable to communicate what they are singing about: love. The Sabri Brothers sing from their direct experience of Divine Love. And it is for this reason that they take so many of their listeners to the Divine Presence.

THE STORY

1

'In pre-Eternity there were hosts of souls'

The Sufi Tradition holds that before the creation, in pre-Eternity there were hosts of souls who knew and loved each other. When these souls descended into the phenomenal realm they felt an attraction, affection, and love for each other. These spiritual birds of a feather flocked together. And, in Eternity they will also be together because the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) has said that when we die we will be with the ones we love.

My attraction and connection to the Sufi Saints of the Indo-Pak Subcontinent, and to their lovers, reaches back to pre-Eternity. However the story of this attraction and the awareness of the spiritual connection began in July 1991, six years prior to seeing the above-mentioned dream about Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri and Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan.

In July 1991 I saw another dream of astounding significance, a dream that was to change the entire direction of my life. To briefly describe that dream:

> An irresistible force is attracting me. In a trancelike state I am searching for one particular man. I feel myself being pulled forward by the power of an unseen unknown man. After much searching I reach a door and enter discreetly. The man I am seeking is seated amongst a group of men. The setting is strange with many dervishes gathered. I sit silently and in awe of the man in the centre. He slowly turns and smiles at me. I don't recognize his face but my heart knows him. I know that I 'know' him. Quietly he says to one of the dervishes, 'She belongs to us. I know from her vibrations she should be with us.' He says that spoken words are not necessary because he and I are communicating on a very high level. Then he slowly starts reciting the names of the Saints (shijra) of a Sufi Order (Silsila). I do not understand which Sufi Silsila it is though! He sways from side to side, rhythmically, in time with the recitation of the names. Some of the dervishes go into ecstasy.

I wrote down the details of this dream as I always did, filed them away in my notes and in the deep recesses of my memory. Then I forgot all about the dream for three years. Strangely, I never again thought about the man in the dream for whom I had so desperately searched and eventually found, the man who had said, 'She belongs to us.'

* * * *

I was living in the solitude of one hundred acres of Australian bush land when I received a videocassette in the mail from my first spiritual master. Written on the packet was 'Sabri Brothers: Sufi Music from Pakistan.' 'What is this?' I thought to myself. It was a cool April evening in 1994. Outside the windows, grazing in the twilight, were the usual visiting wallabies, ears twitching, eyes on the alert. I turned on the video. Without any forewarning and within a few moments the entire direction of my life was altered drastically. Though I did not know it at that time. I was totally unaware of the immense repercussions that were to be created by that memorable video.

This was my initial encounter with Pakistan's best-loved Sufi qawwals, the Sabri Brothers. I had never before heard of qawwali or the Sabri Brothers. In a state of absorbed attention I watched and listened to the qawwals performing at the Shrine of 'Abdullah Shah Ghazi in Karachi. They were singing one of Hazrat Amir Khusrau's songs of love, addressed to his beloved Pir-O-Murshid, Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya. The words, the powerful music and the images hit my heart with incredible force.

'You have given me the nectar of love to drink and you made me drunk the moment my eyes met yours!'

I was spellbound. But I was also perplexed. Somehow there was something so very familiar about this image. Something stirred within me as I watched. What was it? 'I know this place, surely I know this place!' But I had never been to Karachi, so how could I know it? Yet, I recognized the place. And that man, 'Surely I have seen him before, I am certain I know this leading qawwal with the long hair! How is this possible?'

Slowly, out of the deep recesses of memory came the water-colour images of the dream I had seen three years earlier. The place. The occasion. The gathering. And the man! Yes! I had been there before. I had met this man. In my dream! This gathering of Pakistani dervishes and faqirs at the Shrine of 'Abdullah Shah Ghazi was the same

gathering of my dream. And this was the man I had sat behind, in a state of reverent awe, listening as he recited the names of the Saints of a Sufi Silsila. In the dream he had turned and smiled at me and he had said, 'She belongs to us!'

But stranger still, the music and the man's voice stirred something so deep within my being, touching something deeper than anything I had yet experienced in my life. The music wasn't simply emerging from the deep recesses of my memory of some long forgotten melodies or notes. It was as though I had always known this music. Always. Long before I existed. It took me back, further and further and further. Even past the past. Way beyond, awakening and reminding me...of what? I was puzzled. Bewildered by this ancient race memory, the very memory of humanity itself. 'I have heard this music before!' 'How could you have? This is the first time you're hearing it!' 'No! I heard this music in pre-Eternity! I know I did!'

Could this be the memory of the 'day' that the Sufis call the Day of Alast? The day in pre-Eternity when Almighty Allah spoke to each and every soul that would ever come into existence, asking each and every one of us the decisive question, '*Am I not thy Lord*?' '*Alastu birabbikum*?' (Qur'an 7:171) The day when each and every one of us bore witness to Allah's Lordship over us by answering in the affirmative, '*Yea! We do testify*!' '*Bala shahidna*!' (Qur'an 7:171)

'In pre-Eternity there were hosts of souls.'

2

'A major landmark has been reached'

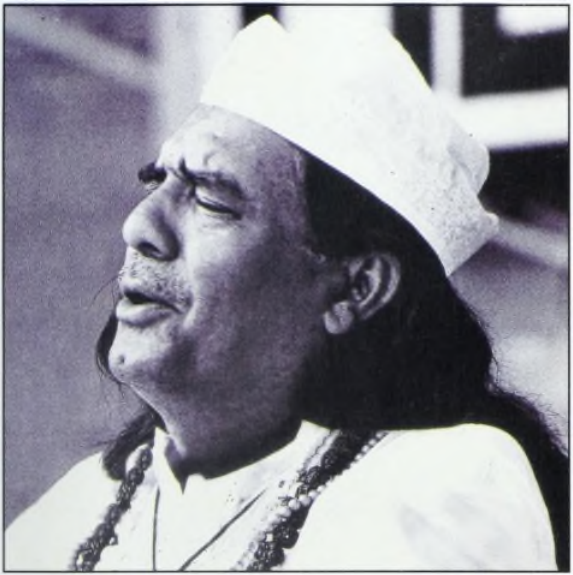
During the next few days I watched the video many times. I was high on the *qawwali* experience of *sama'* and just wanted more and more. I kept returning again and again to the music and to the *qawwal*. The effect was immediate. I felt that a major landmark had been reached on the spiritual journey, a landmark or point where perceptions are altered, different to before. I didn't know what had affected me to such an extent. Was it the music? Or was it the man himself?

In my diary I wrote highly emotive and passionate words, springing directly from my spiritual state. In *Tasawwuf* this condition is called *lisan al-hal*, the tongue of the state. Things that should be contained and held within and thoughts about which one should remain silent gush forth in a great overflow. I had fallen off the boat into the ocean of *'ishq*.

> 'Love lit a fire in my chest, and anything
> that wasn't love left: intellectual subtlety,
> philosophy books, school.
>
> All I want now
> to do or hear
> is poetry.'
>
> – Mevlana Rumi in *Birdsong*

* * * *

It is essential at this point to briefly explain how I reached the state of preparedness and receptivity for this overwhelming experience with Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri and his *qawwali*. It didn't just happen 'out of



The Late Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri, King of Qawwals.

Amatullah at the Mazar of Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri, Karachi, 1999.

Mehmood Ghaznavi Sabri, youngest of the Sabri Brothers, and musicians playing qawwali at the Mazar of Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri, 1999.

Haji Kamal Sabri, second eldest of the Sabri Brothers, in front of the Mazar of Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri, 1999.

Amatullah with Modud Masud Chishti, the Diwan Saheb of the Dargah of Baba Fariduddin Ganj-i-Shakar, at the Urs Celebration, Pakpattan Sharif, Pakistan. 1999.

Mehmood Ghaznavi Sabri playing qawwali at the Mazar of Makhdoom Shah Baba in Mahim, Mumbai, India. 1999.

The Mazar of Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti, Ajmer Sharif, India.

Mehmood Ghaznavi Sabri with Khadim Syed Kalimuddin Chishti, Ajmer Sharif, Urs Celebration, 1999.

Amatullah with a faqir of Warsiyya Silsila in the lanes of Ajmer Sharif, Urs Celebration, 1999.

Mehmood Ghaznavi Sabri (left) and Haji Maqbool Ahmed Sabri (right) at a private *mehfil* in Ajmer Sharif, India. 2000.

Mehmood Ghaznavi Sabri (right) and Haji Maqbool Ahmed Sabri (left) relaxing before their *mehfil* in Ajmer Sharif, 2000.

Mehmood Ghaznavi Sabri with malang Iqra Ali and faqir friend at the Urs Celebration, Ajmer Sharif, 2001.

The faqir chai wala, Chand, preparing his fire for brewing the morning tea, in a secluded corner of the Dargah during the Urs Celebrations in Ajmer Sharif, 2001.

Haji Maqbool Ahmed Sabri (right) and Mehmood Ghaznavi Sabri (centre) performing at the Alliance Francaise, Karachi.

Amatullah with her Pir-o-Murshid Baba Abdul Razzaq Raza Shakoori Chishti at the Urs Celebration of Qazi Baba in Sukkur, Sindh. 2002.

Baba Abdul Razzaq Raza Shakoori Chishti and Mehmood Ghaznavi Sabri, during a night train journey between Sukkur and Karachi. 2002.

Mehmood Ghaznavi Sabri and Amatullah Armstrong Chishti in the courtyard of Jama Masjid, Old Delhi, India, 2004.

the blue' so to speak, even though for me it came unexpectedly and without warning. For several years the ascetic practices of *Tasawwuf* had been preparing me for the intense spiritual moment of the *sama'*, the moment when the placeless place is 'reached' and the timeless time is experienced—utterly.

Music, particularly Western classical music, had played an important role in my life for many years prior to becoming a Muslim. I then became aware that the position of music in Islam was a point of controversy and contention between Muslims with exoteric and esoteric outlooks. Whilst adhering to the esoteric viewpoint that music is permissible, and listening to it is often an act of worship and a means to attain the higher spiritual realities, I nonetheless stopped listening to it for a very extended period of time. As an act of self-discipline in my personal *jihad* against the *nafs al-ammara*, the commanding or lower self, I totally denied myself this pleasure and turned instead to the practice of *zikrullah*, the Remembrance of Allah. I hated denying myself music. It was extremely difficult to hold to such a firm resolve. But the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) had said, '*The Garden is surrounded by hated things.*' So I persevered—for ten years—a long time! I devotedly and sincerely applied myself to the purification of the heart using the Sufi methods of *zikr*. Allah tells us in the Holy Qur'an, '*Surely in the Remembrance of Allah do hearts find satisfaction.*' The Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said, '*Verily, there is a polish for everything and the polish for the heart is the zikrullah.*'

Tasawwuf springs from two sacred sources: the Holy Qur'an, and the art and science of Self-Transformation. The Holy Qur'an is the final Divine Revelation from Allah to His humanity. The art and science of Self-Transformation are comprised of the spiritual doctrine and methods that were taught and practised by the Last Universal Prophet and Messenger Muhammad (PBUH).

These spiritual practices are aimed at purifying and polishing the heart, in readiness to receive any inrushes of knowledge of the Divinity (*ma'rifat*) that may or may not be sent. Striving to reach a state of preparedness, or readiness to receive, requires one to engage, totally and utterly, in spiritual struggle (*mujahada*) and ascetic discipline (*riyada*) using the celestial weapon of Remembrance of Allah (*zikrullah*). This process of discipline and struggle in the spiritual battle is an intense contraction, as all warfare must be. But there are always lulls on the battlefield when the enemy retreats allowing the warrior

time to rest and contemplate the imminent victory that he believes to be close at hand. Fleeting moments of ineffable joy and love engulf and expand the heart as it catches tiny wafts of fragrant breezes from the abode of the Beloved. Yet, this expansion soon fades and recedes. The contraction returns and dominates. The battle resumes.

After adhering to these practices with dedication and sincerity, a crucial stage is reached when the bird that is trapped inside the cage must break free and soar towards the heavens. The purified heart has become so sensitive, so shining and so delicate that it is filled to overflowing with the most painful yearning for the Beloved. The spirit within longs to be reunited with the Spirit from which it was severed at the moment of *'Kun fayakun!' 'Be! And it is!'* (Holy Qur'an 35:82). At this point, after an extended period of spiritual contraction, the heart is in a state of readiness to receive the expansion of the *sama'*, or spiritual audition.

However *sama'* does not hold the same place of importance within the various Sufi *tariqas*. *Sama'* and dance (*raqs*) are integral to the Mevlevi *Tariqa*, founded by the great Sufi Saint and mystic poet Jalaluddin Rumi. Orders such as the Suhrawardiyya and the Naqshbandiyya prohibit *sama'* completely or compromise by permitting the songs without any musical accompaniment, though music has recently been introduced into the Haqqani-Mevlevi branch of the Naqshbandi Order. Some Sufi Shaykhs say that *sama'* is not suitable for the novice, whilst others encourage it. In the Shadhiliyya (Shazliyya) *Silsila* music is sometimes used as a means to open the heart to higher spiritual realities, after an intensive period of discipline and struggle. One of the spiritual practices of the Shadhiliyya is the *hadrah* or 'presence', in which bodily movements, induced by the chanting of *zikr*, are accompanied by the rhythmic beats of drum and tambourine. Within the Chishti *Silsila sama'* or *qawwali* is of vital importance. It is indispensable. *Qawwali* is 'a method of worship' and 'a means of spiritual advancement' and 'a feast for the soul.'

* * * *

And so, with a heart trembling and quivering under the tight grip of the spiritual contraction of infinite longing, I turned on a video of Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri and the Sabri Brothers at the Mazar of 'Abdullah Shah Ghazi...and then...the expansion! The bird escaped from its cage.

It soared. It reached. It experienced, for a flash, the placeless place and the timeless time of the eternal 'now', the creative moment. This is the *sama'*.

True *sama'* is a bird which flies from Allah, to Allah. Allah is the singer and Allah is the hearer. At this Divine Feast the singer and the hearer become One.

* * * *

I had reached a major landmark on the spiritual journey. A landmark of such awe inspiring splendour that all of the territory I had previously traversed, all of the points of majesty and beauty I had encountered, all of the lesser landmarks I had recognized seemed nothing compared to this one dazzling landmark.

I reflected, questioning myself—was this landmark the man or the music or the experience of *sama'*? Initially I thought the illuminated and illuminating man was the landmark. This shining light that was guiding and directing me to...I knew not what!

The immediacy of this impact was overwhelming as happens so often to people of the Sufi Path. It is known that a single glance from a Sufi Master can instantly transform the one upon whom the glance falls. Fakhruddin 'Iraqi, the ecstatic poet of Persia, tried to flee from the glance of Shaykh Baha'uddin Zakariyya' Multani, saying, *'Just as a magnet draws iron, so the Shaykh will capture me. We must go at once!'* But to no avail, there was no escaping his destiny.

The divine attraction of Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri was unbelievable. This was not a gradually increasing attraction. It was instantaneous. And it was all the more astounding because prior to this encounter I had been very sober, spiritually speaking. Even during my quest for direction before embracing Islam, I remember being drawn to the 'level headed' paths. And any outward display of ecstatic spiritual states actually made me feel quite uncomfortable. Yet, here I was, no longer restrained and level headed, but whirling under the divine attraction! I had become *Majnun*, seeing nothing but *Layla*. *'To see the beauty of Layla you need the eyes of Majnun.'*

'Love has taken away my practices
and filled me with poetry.

I tried to keep quietly repeating
'No strength but Yours',
but I couldn't.

I had to clap and sing.
I used to be respectable and chaste and stable,
but who can stand in this strong wind
and remember those things?'

— Mevlana Rumi in *Like This*

I was fanatical during that period of my spiritual journey. In retrospect I realize that such extreme passion was necessary. Without it I would never have found the courage or had the guts to take the drastic steps I was destined to take in the coming years. It was my obsession with this Pakistani *qawwal* that eventually drew me across the seas to a new life in a new land. This obsession had attached me to a loop on the end of a long thread. And someone was pulling on the other end of that thread, bringing me closer and closer to the land of the great Sufi Saints.

3

A book, a search and a fax

When I embarked upon my next task, formulating a small dictionary of key Sufi terms, I thought it would be serious yet relatively easy work. I sat at the computer and started going through the alphabetical list of Arabic words, giving brief explanations against each term, whilst taking frequent breaks to dive into, again and again, the magic of the Pakistani *qawwal's* voice. He was continually opening sweet new spiritual experiences for me.

But the terminology was not destined to be a thin and concise booklet. In the pre-dawn chill of a mid-winter night the book took a radically different direction. I dreamt yet another dream. I was blessed beyond understanding with the most yearned-for of all visions: a dream in which I had a vision of the Best of Creation, our Noble and Exalted Prophet Muhammad al-Mustafa (PBUH). *May Allah Shower him with Blessings and Peace.* Only this much can be said. In images of such beauty and tranquillity I was given a book to write—a Sufi terminology.

I was overwhelmed. This was an awesome and frightening task! Yet, I was pervaded with great joy. But this joy was tinged with fear—the fear of failure, failure to fulfil the task, failure to live up to the responsibility. But, errors, faults and shortcomings are our own. Success is only from Allah through His Infinite Grace.

Very quickly the book took over my life. I immersed myself in works by the great Sufi Masters, reading and re-reading, clarifying points and comparing notes as I compiled the terminology. I was a great devotee of Shaykh Muhyi-ud-Din Ibn al-'Arabi, the twelfth century Andalusian Master. His metaphysical teachings permeated my worldview and he was the Master whose works I consulted the most. Sometimes the power of his knowledge had such an effect upon me that I would literally be bowled over under the influence! It is interesting to note that Ibn al-'Arabi was utterly opposed to *sama'*,

listening to spiritual music, and even forbade his *murids* from taking part in such gatherings!

Yet, as I worked at the computer in a sun-filled room overlooking a hillside of tall gum trees I became increasingly aware of the compelling spiritual presence of the Pakistani *qawwal*. He was always there, beside me. I was being carried on a wave of divine influence. It is no exaggeration to say that I was drowning, spiritually, in his *qawwali*, in his voice, in his breath. After listening to a cassette or watching a video I would return to the computer with fresh insights and knowledge. I did not resist but surrendered to the influence, allowing it to take me because I knew the book was under spiritual protection.

When the terminology was nearing completion a devastating bush fire made its way to our timber house in the dense bush land. It was the dry season. The weather was fierce. Late one night I looked up the valley to the distant hilltops. Fire. A bushfire was starting to rage. Slowly it burned its way down the valley, getting closer and closer. By early morning our home was surrounded by volunteer fire fighters. They chopped back the undergrowth and beat down the scrub to stop the fire reaching the house. They stood ready with water tanks and hoses. And as the fire burned I continued to work on the terminology. I knew this book had to be finished. Whilst a bushfire raged outside our home another fire was burning within my heart! I came downstairs and stood on the verandah and made *du'a* (supplication) for our home to be protected. Then I returned to the computer. The fire was so close. The smoke burned our eyes and filled our throats. The fire fighters were worried. I was not. I had complete trust that our home would be safe. Nevertheless, I gathered together a few precious items, just in case we had to evacuate. And what were those precious items? What were the things that I felt must be saved if the fire did sweep through the house? The floppy discs of the terminology and my videotapes of Sabri Brothers. The fire miraculously stopped only a few feet away from the house leaving us standing on a mat of lush green grass encircled by blackened and charred gum trees. The house was safe. The terminology was safe and the videotapes were safe.

The terminology was quickly finished. It's title: *Sufi Terminology (al-Qamus al-Sufi): The Mystical Language of Islam*. Throughout the writing of the *Qamus* the divine influence of Shaykh Sabri's spiritual presence had been profound. The book could never have been written without this overflow from the spiritual realm. I had to acknowledge the depth of the love, honour and respect I felt for him. But how could

I acknowledge my indebtedness to him? The only way, as a small token gesture, was to place his name in the dedication. Yet, I still didn't even know his correct name. Then, just at the moment of need, when the manuscript and floppy disks were ready for the publisher, I received an imported CD that I had ordered months earlier. It was a Sabri Brothers' recording made in 1980 and on the cover was his name—Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri.

* * * *

The work was finished. *Alhamdulillah*. All Praise to Allah. I now had time to rest and reflect upon the spiritual influence of Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri. I knew nothing about him except that he had entered my life and entirely changed its course. I started experiencing an irresistible urge to meet him. Why did I want to meet him? I didn't really know why but I knew I just had to. I knew I would never find any rest until I had found this man. I had to express the depth of my love, honour and respect. I wanted to tell him that 'Sufi Terminology' was really his. But where was I to find this Pakistani *qawwal*? The search then began. And this search took on greater and greater urgency with each passing day. I had absolutely no idea that Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri and his brothers were truly famous international artists. I did not know that their names were household words throughout Pakistan. For me he was a saintly man and it was for that reason I wanted to meet him.

Now, as I sit in Pakistan, wrapped in the love of the great Sufi Saints of the Chishti *Silsila*, I look back on those days of desperate searching when I knew very little about these Saints of the Indo-Pak Subcontinent. I knew very little about them but perhaps it was the Chishti Saints who were pulling on that long thread and drawing me to Pakistan.

On a wall in my home I had a reproduction of a beautiful Indian miniature of Khwaja Mu'inuddin Chishti and in my library I had several books about the Saint and his Shrine in Ajmer Sharif, Rajasthan. *The Book of Sufi Healing*, by the American Muslim, Shaykh Hakim Moinuddin Chishti, was vitally important. Who can say what blessings were emanating from that miniature and those books! My heart told me to write to the people at the Shrine seeking their advice as to the whereabouts of the Sabri Brothers. I enclosed a few pieces of silver jewellery with the letter, a small gift from my heart to the Saint of the Shrine! Who can say how many blessings emerged from that gift! I waited, with a degree of patience, for a reply. Eventually, a letter

arrived. No, they did not know the address of the great Pakistani *qawwal* but suggested that I make contact with the Pakistani Embassy in Australia, which I did, only to be abruptly dismissed by an obviously anti-*qawwali* secretary. I wrote to video companies in Dubai and Birmingham. I wrote to the Chishti Order of North America whose Head was Shaykh Hakim Moinuddin Chishti, the author of *The Book of Sufi Healing*. Surely someone, somewhere could give me a clue, a hint, an indication. I waited.

* * * *

It was a peaceful afternoon in January 1995. A host of birds, my usual visitors, perched in the wattle tree outside the back door—King parrots, lorikeets, magpies, spangled drongos, butcherbirds, and sparrows.

The phone rang. A fax message started coming through. Anxiously I watched, hoping for the long awaited good news, a sign, a hint or indication about Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri's whereabouts. The letterhead of the North American Headquarters of the Chishti Order appeared. I was anxious. At last I would know.

Slowly the fax came through, creeping millimetre by millimetre. And as it crept out I read. And as I read my secure little world fell apart.

'As Allah has Willed, it is our information that Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri has passed from this life within the year and is now with his Rabb, his Lord. Inna lillahi wa inna ilaihi raji'un (from Allah we come and to Him is the returning).'

The words sank to the depths of my heart and lay there, motionless. The world became silent. All colours faded. The atmosphere grew heavy and weighed upon me like lead.

I stared at the fax in disbelief, not fully comprehending. 'What? What! O No! It's too late!' I was devastated. Distraught. And on my prayer rug I let the tears flow.

'O Allah! No! He must still be alive. I must meet him. Please Allah!' I begged. I pleaded. I didn't want to believe it. I tried to refuse to believe it. But if it really was true then all I could understand was that there was an impenetrable gulf that separated me in this earthly realm from him in the Unseen Realm. If it was true then he had left this world and it was too late! At that time I believed there was an impenetrable gulf separating us. There was not. There never had been. But I didn't then realize it.

My grief was extreme and I was not to be comforted by words. My emotions were totally out of control. I had lost balance, a balance that I had struggled to achieve throughout those years of long night vigils and ascetic disciplines. I tried to bridle the extremity of my feelings. How could I ever reveal and express what I was experiencing? Yet, the depth of my emotion was a mystery even to myself. Why was I so grieved, so distraught over this man? Was there a connection between an Australian woman and a famous Pakistani Sufi *qawwal*? Or was this a great Divine deception, a *makr* of the Almighty through which He tests His slaves, a Divine deception about which the Sufis are extremely wary? Was it a blessing or was it a curse? I didn't know. I was simply experiencing the most extreme sense of loss.

So I gave myself over to the sadness and turned on a video of Sabri Brothers. What else could I do? Where else could I find any sort of solace and comfort?

Truly great *qawwals*, those who are blessed with gifts from Allah, can open the heart to profound insights. They can be the means through which Knowledge of the Divinity is unveiled to the heart, albeit for only a flash, an instant. *Qawwali* is the greatest soother and healer of wounds when the heart is afflicted with the unbearable pain of separation from the Beloved. When all else fails *qawwali* is the remedy for grief stricken lovers.

In my desolation I wrote distracted poems of longing and despair like so many other distressed lovers before me.

Your beauty broke me to pieces!
Your voice shattered my heart!
One glance from you destroyed me!
Then, the magic of your breath set me free!

* * * *

It was true. He had passed away. But—even in the midst of my despair, he was there, with me just as he had been when I wrote the Sufi Terminology. His spiritual presence accompanied me throughout those dark days and long nights of sadness.

Finally I accepted the sad fact. I would never meet him! But I was anxious to learn how he had passed away. Did he suffer? Was he in pain? Who could tell me? How would I get these details? On one of my Sabri Brothers' videos there was a phone number of an agency in

Birmingham. A man in the office answered my phone call of enquiry. He gave me two telephone numbers in Karachi with the assurance that I would get the answers that I so desperately sought. The following day I phoned Karachi, thinking it was probably the number of a recording company or something of that nature. I spoke with a very gentle lady who sweetly and sadly gave me all the information I wanted.

'Who are you?' she asked.

'No-one. I am just an Australian lady who loves Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri so much.'

This was my first contact in the physical realm with members of the Sabri family. This soft-spoken lady made me promise to keep in touch with the family. I did!

Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri had passed away on 5 April 1994. That meant when I first saw him on the video on 23 April 1994 he was already in the intermediary space, the *barzakh*, between the Visible Realm and the Unseen Realm. My connection with him was spiritual, across time and space.

4

The Boat and the Ocean

Which is the higher path, the Path of Knowledge or the Path of Love? Some of the Sufi Masters hold that one must know before one can love, whilst others believe one can only truly love what one already knows. Do we know the Beloved first and then love him because of that knowledge? Or do we love the Beloved and then come to know him? Is the *'ashiq*, the lover, hierarchically superior to the *'arif*, the knower, or vice-versa? Muhyi-ud-Din Ibn al-'Arabi declares that the knower is higher than the lover except when the lover is at the same time a knower. Just look at Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi, the intoxicated lover, whirling in ecstasy around his sun, his *Shams Tabrizi*! He said, *'The way of love is not a subtle argument. The door there is devastation!'*

And a twentieth century Chishti Shaykh said, 'The way of Love is the shortest, sweetest, the most interesting path, leading to the best and the most valuable results. It is like burning the forest instead of uprooting every single tree to clear the land. Lovers make the best raw material for Sufism whatever the charges of extravagance and frivolity levelled by society against them. The bigger the storm of love in a man's heart the greater his flight.'

In the Sufi Path there is no place for a watered down, sentimental, insipid love. The love that consumes a *dervish* is a raging fire. The *'ishq* of the dervish must never be confused with any romantic notions of love. The fire of *'ishq* is a mighty ocean, a fiery ocean that burns and drowns simultaneously. The Path of Love is not scattered with fragrant rose petals winding its way through groves of shady trees. Rather, it is a track across a burning desert, a channel through a stormy ocean to the Beloved. But, the burning desert is sweet to the *dervish*. So too is the stormy ocean!

Ultimately, each traveller on the Sufi Path will travel on the way that has been laid out for him since pre-Eternity. He will travel the

destined path. And for some that may actually mean changing paths in mid-journey, from the Path of Knowledge to the Path of Love, falling off the Boat of Knowledge into the sweet ocean of *'ishq*. Mevlana Rumi says, *'Intellectuals try not to drown, while the whole purpose of love is drowning!'*

After an extended period of seclusion in the bush land I was required to return to the city to embark upon an arduous journey within the academic arena. I was given directives from within my *Tariqa* to undertake a Master of Arts Degree. I was shocked. I had not been part of a tertiary institution for over 25 years and the mere thought of going back to university terrified me! But, having always endeavoured to carry out the spiritual master's commands I had no alternative, no choice.

It was during this period that a momentous sign was given to me in several dreams from the Realm of Imagination, *'alam-i khayal*. The meaning of these dreams was blindingly apparent. The powerful spiritual connection between Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri and myself was revealed through symbolic images, images clearly representing my spiritual allegiance to him. A *Ruhani-bai'at* is an allegiance that takes place in the spiritual realm with a Master who has passed away. In my heart I knew that he was my Murshid.

From the tranquillity of the bush land we moved to a rented tenth floor apartment in an inner city suburb of Brisbane. Initially this move disturbed me. The incessant noise of traffic, the proximity of neighbours with their booming televisions, and most particularly the thud of footsteps from the apartment above! But, a stage is reached on the spiritual journey, a stage after intense isolation or *khalwa*, when the traveller returns to society, to *jalwa*. Through Divine Grace, the gift of 'isolation with Allah' that was bestowed during the time of physical isolation can be retained and carried into society. This is known as *khalwa* in *jalwa*, isolation in society. In the midst of the thronging crowd one is still intimately conversing with one's Lord. Then one tastes the sweetness, *halwa* of *khalwa* in *jalwa*. A blessed condition!

I was fortunate to have connections in the Visual Arts Department of the Queensland University of Technology. It was the perfect opportunity for me to write a thesis about *Tasawwuf* and Art. The thesis, *The Artist Transformed: Sufi Views on the Development of the Self and Art* was to expand upon the Sufi doctrine and practices in order to show how this teaching has profound relevance to contemporary artists who are genuinely seeking Knowledge of the Divinity.

Soon after commencing the thesis I realized that Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri was yet again the catalyst and inspiration for this work. Just as he had carried me through the writing of *Sufi Terminology* so also he was carrying me through *The Artist Transformed.* As I wrote I realized that I was writing about him without actually naming him. He was the embodiment of what I was endeavouring to explain and elaborate upon. He was the artist who had sought and found the Divinity within himself. He was the purified and empty vessel through whom the Divine Light poured into this earthly realm. He was the transformed artist through whom divine inspiration was entering the physical realm. And this inspiration kept flowing to me as I worked on the thesis.

As a traveller following the Sufi Path of Knowledge it was the teachings of Shaykh Muhyi-ud-Din Ibn al-'Arabi, the supremely sober knower of Allah, that continued to influence and colour my written work. Yet, my life was being overrun by the bewildering intoxication of an *'ashiq*, a lover. I was afloat on the ocean of *'ishq* but I kept trying to get back into the boat because I believed that was where I belonged. However, try as I might, I just kept falling back into that sweet ocean!

It was a tedious struggle trying to get the university system to accept my un-academic style of writing, pouring as it did from my heart, not from my head. This had been my major hesitation about returning to university. However I was blessed with having an extremely sensitive and spiritually inclined Supervisor, and as anyone who has undertaken a Postgraduate Degree knows, the quality of the chosen Supervisor is of paramount importance. Due to his intimate knowledge of the university structure he was able to take me through the labyrinth, side stepping obstacles and overcoming hurdles till the goal, the 'Degree', is achieved.

My Supervisor had a keen and genuine interest in the metaphysics of Muhyi-ud-Din Ibn al-'Arabi, as have many other spiritual seekers in the West. Having read my books, he had an awareness of the *adab* (spiritual courtesy) that must be observed with the people of *Tasawwuf* and therefore his respect for me was high indeed. Eventually I was awarded a Master of Arts Degree. And how happy and relieved I was when it was all over.

* * * *

This was 1997, the year when Allah Almighty called me to His House. Haj: the dream of every Muslim. Haj is Haj. Inexpressible. Only the one who has performed Haj can comprehend that the experience of Haj is inexpressible. Only the one who has tasted knows.

Yet, certain moments and experiences not directly related to the majesty of Haj can be told, experiences directly related to my spiritual connection with Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri. Mehmood, Haji Saheb's youngest brother, has urged me to include them in this book. So:

We were in a plane full of Hajis from Australia flying to Jeddah. It was two in the morning on 5 April 1997, a special day. Why so? It had been exactly three years since Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri had passed away in Karachi. I looked at the navigation map displayed on the video screen in the plane, wondering where we were on this special day. And where were we? Our plane was flying over Karachi! And I thought to myself, 'Haji Saheb is taking me to Madina. We are going together.' Late in the night of that same day, 5 April, we were offering our prayers at the Masjid Nabawi in Madina: a journey from Karachi to Madina on 5 April. And there is no coincidence!

Madina *Munawwara*. Madina is called the Luminous. Madina is bathed in the most glorious rose-coloured Light. Madina is Divine Light. Madina is Divine Beauty. Madina is Divine Compassion. Madina is Divine Tenderness. Madina is Divine Love. Madina is the Home of the Beloved of Allah.

Madina is inexpressibly beautiful, yet somehow the Sabri Brothers managed to express this inexpressible beauty and wonder in their *qawwali*. Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri was an *'ashiq-e Rasul*, a lover of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). He was lost in *'ishq-e Muhammadi*. His voice and his breath captured and released the intensity of emotion that is to be experienced in Madina: Madina with all its heart-breaking, heart-melting Beauty. The Sabri Brothers fill our hearts with an overflowing love of our Prophet. And it is for this reason that they are said to be the Prophet's Gift to us.

Surely the Sabri Brothers' most loved *qawwali* must be *Tajdar-e-Haram*:

O! King of the Holy Sanctuary
Cast your glance of tender munificence upon us, the grief-stricken,
So our ill luck may change.
There is no one here to help us, the grief-stricken.
We have come to your doorstep.
Cast your glance of tender munificence upon us
Or we shall die here, on your doorstep, reciting your name.

The comment was made, 'The Sabri Brothers will enter *Jannat*, Paradise, because of *Tajdar-e-Haram*.' *Ameen. Ameen. Ameen.*

In my diary I wrote:

> In Madina Munawwara I was overwhelmed by the presence of Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri. He was with me, constantly. Wherever I was, he was. He walked beside me. He sat beside me. He ate with me. He was always there, right beside me. Sometimes I actually felt myself encased within his large frame. At other times I simply felt the warmth of his smile, an all-encompassing tenderness. His presence was most powerful within and around the Masjid Nabawi. I could almost feel his breath. I could almost feel his touch. At times I thought that if I reached out my hand I would touch his! It was overwhelmingly beautiful. It was real.

To leave Madina is to experience intense sadness. You do not want to leave. You want to stay—for ever and ever. Then, as soon as you have left you simply yearn to return.

From Madina we journeyed to Holy Mecca for Haj. Haj is beyond words. Haj is Pure Majesty. Haj has to be experienced. It cannot be described.

The Sabri Brothers sing a stirring *qawwali* about Haj, '*Labayk Allahumma Labayk*'. The poetry is by Adeeb Raypuri. I played it incessantly before departing for the Sacred Journey. At the end of the *qawwali* there are some poignant words, '*If it is your destiny to stand at Arafat remember us in your du'a and pray that our names are written as slaves of Mustafa.*'

Arafat! Arafat is Haj. Arafat is where each pilgrim stands bare and alone, in the Presence of Allah Almighty. Arafat is annihilation, the pulverizing of the ego. The self reduced to naught. Standing on the earth under the blazing sun of Arabia I made the *du'a* 'Ya Allah! Bless and love Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri and his brothers, Haji Kamal and Haji Maqbool and bless and love Mehmood. Write their names as lovers and slaves of Your Beloved, Muhammad al-Mustafa! *Ameen. Ameen, Ameen.*'

After the Haj we were able to remain in the Holy City for a further two weeks, the obvious reasons being the congestion caused by the mass exodus of *hajis* plus some complications with the planning of our Australian tour managers. The true reason was that the Almighty was allowing us to stay at His House a little longer. It was not yet time for us to depart.

So it was my *kismet* to be in Holy Mecca on 23 April, another special day in my personal calendar. I woke up in the small hours of the morning. It was exactly three years since my initial encounter with the Sabri Brothers on that life altering video. I rose from my bed at 2 a.m. and prepared myself for Umrah. And with the intention, 'This Umrah is my gift for Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri' I performed the rights of the Lesser Pilgrimage in his name. What greater gift could I give him?

* * * *

After six weeks in Arabia we returned to Australia. I phoned through to Karachi to give salaams to the Sabri Brothers after my Haj. A man with a deep and gentle voice answered; my first encounter with Mehmood Ghaznavi, the youngest of the brothers. A vital connection was made during that phone conversation. Linked spiritually, across thousands of miles of ocean, I felt as though I had known him all my life. The thread which pulled!

* * * *

Fakhruddin 'Iraqi said, '*Often Love conquers the ear before the eye.*'

* * * *

Earlier in the year, before Haj, when I had been working on my thesis *The Artist Transformed*, I had experienced a powerful need to devote an entire book to Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri and his brothers, in the future, if possible. Then after performing Haj I saw the dream in which Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri had told Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan 'this is the lady who is going to write the book about me.' A confirmation. An approval. A directive even! This dream strengthened the urge, and as the urge developed and grew stronger I started to daydream, planning how I would go to Pakistan one day. It seemed like a wild daydream that could never manifest. How could I go to Pakistan alone? But I kept planning and dreaming. Who knows? Perhaps. That thread, whose end I was hanging on to, was growing taut as slowly I was being pulled.

Once again a directive came from the *Tariqa*. I was required to undertake the work on Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri as a Doctoral

dissertation. So after returning from Haj I started working on a proposal for the next thesis, titled *The Art of Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri: Its Place Within the Tradition of Sufi Music*.

I worked happily by myself in my room at my computer. The words flowed and I started to immerse myself in the research. But when I went back into the university atmosphere I immediately encountered barriers. The man who was to be my Principal Supervisor did not have the spiritual yearning or sensitivity of my previous Supervisor. He insisted that I write in a more academic style. I knew I could not. I did not want to. *Qawwali* is from the heart not the head and as far as I was concerned academia meant death to *The Art of Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri*. How could I fit the ocean of Love that is *qawwali* into the thimble of academia?

You've seen a glob
of oil on water? That's how a lover
sits with intellectuals, there, but alone
in a circle of himself.
Some intellectual
tries to give sound advice to a lover.
All he hears back is, *I love you.*
I love you.

– Mevlana Rumi in *Like This*

But remember, this is not a sentimentalised *'I love you. I love you.'* These are the words of an ecstatic lover. This lover is not saying, *'I love you'* to anyone other than the Beloved because everywhere he looks he sees only the Beloved.

So I took little or no notice of the intellectual's advice. I decided to think about academic styles later. I just wanted to start working. I wanted to go to Pakistan. I yearned to make *ziyarat* to the Mazar of Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri. But how was I to get to Pakistan?

Okay, I thought to myself, if I am in the university system I will take advantage of everything and anything it has to offer me. I applied for a travel grant and a scholarship. But there were complications and contradictions with the formalities of my Master of Arts Degree. These delays meant my applications for grant and scholarship were too late. I was told to put everything on hold for one year. I couldn't. I felt as if I could not wait another month let alone another year! I was burning up inside. I had to get to Karachi somehow, that was all I knew. Unseen forces were attracting and drawing me there. That thread again! I

started planning in earnest to go to Pakistan. How was I to get there? There must be a way! The wild daydream was beginning to manifest! Before leaving Australia I had very brief contact with a Pakistani man from Lahore. His name was Tariq and he was a doctor. Throughout his life in Pakistan he had searched for, but never found, a suitable Murshid. He was destined to find his Murshid in Australia. A Pakistani man whose spiritual journey brought him to Australia and an Australian woman whose spiritual journey would take her to Pakistan!

I remember only one thing Tariq said to me during our short meeting. It was a heartfelt remark the significance of which was to unfold within the coming months. And I remember that as he uttered the words his eyes gleamed with inner light.

'Amatullah!' he said. *'Amatullah! Allah manifested you in Australia but... you belong to the Mazars of Pakistan!'*

5

'Allah manifested you in Australia but....'

My PIA flight landed at Lahore International Airport at six o'clock on a chilly January morning in 1998. It was the second day of Eid al-Fitr. I crossed the windy tarmac to Passport Control. I was a bundle of mixed emotions. Anticipation. Anxiety. Apprehension. Expectation. Elation. Excitement. Dread. Fear. Nervousness. Even a sense of freedom! I had never done anything like this in my life. Travelling alone in the tight grip of my obsession. What was awaiting me in this strange new country?

A passing airport vehicle blew thick black clouds of diesel smoke and fumes directly into my face, heralding my arrival. *So this is Pakistan!* Pulling my scarf tightly over my nose and mouth I crossed the threshold and entered Pakistan; drawn and attracted by the unseen spiritual forces of the great Sufi Saints and their lovers.

I had come to Pakistan to meet the Sabri Brothers who live in Karachi, so why would I first visit Lahore? Now I understand that it was not me who was doing the planning. I was being guided and directed, protected through this entire journey! *Adab*, spiritual courtesy required that before doing anything in Pakistan I must first visit and give salaams to the patron Saint of Lahore.

* * * *

The shrine of a Sufi saint is called a *Mazar* and the visit to a *Mazar* is known as a *ziyarat*. One can only make a *ziyarat* to the *Mazar* of a Sufi Saint if and when the Saint himself calls one to his presence. Without this call one can never reach the threshold of the Saint. This is the belief of those who believe in the Sufi Saints and their Shrines.

Within the Islamic community in Pakistan, just mentioning the word 'Mazar' can create a multitude of reactions, ranging from an upheaval of indignation and a storm of outrage to an all-pervading spiritual sweetness and selfless joy. 'Mazar' can ignite an explosive of hatred and contempt or it can light a lamp of tender love and devotion. Cries of *'bid'at'*, innovation, have little or no effect upon the hearts of the lovers of the Sufi Saints, those wonderful and varied human beings, the devotees, the lovers, the needy, the sick, who often traverse great distances under harsh conditions in order to reach the thresholds of the courts of their beloved Saints.

* * * *

In Lahore I stayed with a family who had become my friends through telephone conversations. Both the mother and son were firm believers in the Sufi Saints, both being *murids* of a Chishti Shaykh, and it was the son who had contacted me whilst he was studying in Australia. And so we became close friends over the telephone, though we never actually met in Australia. Our first meeting was at Lahore Airport on that chilly January morning.

On my first night in Pakistan my friends took me for my first *ziyarat* to my first *Mazar*. We entered the mysterious lanes and crowded alleyways surrounding the blessed court of Lahore's patron Saint, Hazrat Syed Ali al-Hujweri, lovingly known as Data Ganj Baksh and Data Saheb.

* * * *

Hazrat Syed Ali Bin Uthman al-Hujwiri was born in Ghazni, Afghanistan around the year 400 AH (AD 1009). After travelling widely on his spiritual quest he was instructed by his *Murshid* to proceed to Lahore and spread the message of Islam. His book, *Kashf-ul-Mahjub*, written at the request of a student of Sufism, is the earliest Persian treatise on Sufism. Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya said of *Kashf-ul-Mahjub*, 'Whoever amongst you is unable to find a Pir may read this book thoroughly and it will enable him to succeed in his mission.' That is, for he who has no Shaykh let *Kashf-ul-Mahjub* be his Shaykh. Hazrat Shahidullah Faridi, the Englishman who gave up a life of ease and luxury in England to pursue the spiritual path in India, embraced Islam in 1936 after reading *Kashf-ul-Mahjub*.

In 561 AH (AD 1165), ninety-six years after the passing of Data Saheb, Khwaja Mu'inuddin Chishti performed his forty-day retreat at the *Mazar*. After his seclusion and spiritual illumination, he recited the following verses, 'Thou art Ganj Baksh, the Bestower of Spiritual Treasures, in both worlds. Thou art the manifestation of the Glory of Allah. Thou art an accomplished guide for those who are perfect and Thou showeth the Way to those who have gone astray.' Since that time Hazrat Ali al-Hujwiri has been known as Data Ganj Baksh, the Bestower of Spiritual Treasures. Such was the spiritual rank of Data Saheb! Such was the spiritual rank of Khwaja Saheb!

Baba Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakar also performed his forty-day retreat near the *Mazar*. Whenever Baba Farid would make ziyarat to the *Mazar* of Data Saheb he would reach a certain place and fall down in prostration. At this place he would be in a state of awe because, with his *basirat*, his inner eye, the eye of his heart, he could 'see' the descent of *Rahmat*, Divine Mercy, raining down upon the Mazar. He would fall to the earth in humility and then proceed to the Shrine on his hands and knees. Such was the spiritual rank of Data Saheb! Such was the spiritual rank of Baba Farid!

* * * *

I made my way amongst the strangest array of people thronging around the outskirts of the *Mazar*. Past old men with brown wrinkled faces, ragged clothes and radiant smiles. Past *dervishes* in colourful patchwork caps with wooden alms bowls. Past longhaired *malangs*, those lost in love of the Divinity, with their iron bracelets and anklets jangling and strings of fake amber beads swaying around their necks. Past gangs of alert and sneaky street urchins, ready to pick any unguarded pocket or purse and past queues of hungry silent beggars waiting for the gift of food.

Passing the sellers of garlands and *chadars*, I caught a waft of a delicate yet heady fragrance, a fragrance unique to Pakistan and her *Mazars*. Red roses. Not like the western counterparts with flamboyant blooms and no aroma. These Pakistani roses, the most humble and modest of roses, have retained the essence of rose and their fragrance is for me the symbol of the Pakistan I now know and love. Fragrant red rose petals lovingly carried by devotees to be scattered over the resting places of the Saints.

Here at Data Saheb's Mazar on my first *ziyarat* I carefully observed the *adab*, the courtesy and etiquette that is essential when one is called to the presence of a friend of Allah. Quiet footsteps, soft swishing garments, gentle caresses of cool marble filigree, eyes cast down in respectful greeting, hands raised high in supplication, sitting quietly in meditation, rhythm of clicking prayer beads and whispered remembrances. Lucky and blessed are those who receive *faizan*, inspiration at the *Mazars* of Data Saheb and other Sufi Saints.

Hazrat Wahid Baksh Rabbani (AD 1910–1995), the twentieth century Chishti Saint who translated *Kashf-ul-Mahjub* into English, has said that the amount of *faizan*, inspiration, one receives from the Saint of the *Mazar* very much depends on the effort one has made at home. The more prayer, *zikr*, fasting, and spiritual exercises one does, the greater is ones power of reception at the *Mazar*. And this in turn serves as a greater incentive for increased endeavour at home. He also advised *murids* to go only to the *Mazars* of Saints of their own *Silsila* because it may happen that the *murid* receives a *faizan* that is not suited to his spiritual status. And he recommended that his *murids* concentrate only on the Saint. No prayers or Quranic recitation or *zikr*. This, he says, can be done at home. In the presence of the Saint one should concentrate solely and purely upon the Saint.

Some people who visit the *Mazars* are put-off or discouraged and disheartened by the 'circus of crazy people' who hang around the place. I love what Hazrat Rabbani wrote regarding this spectacle. 'But the greatest purpose which mad men and women and unwanted human beings, indulging in antinomian activities, serve, is this: they are there to counterbalance the enormous torrents of blessings, charms and fascinations, which, if left unimpaired by the clowns, would turn people mad by their intensity. This is as well the philosophy underlying all sins and darknesses in the world, as looked at from the higher spiritual Divine angle. God is Beauty! What He created is nothing but Beauty.'

The *malangs* are beautiful. The *faqirs* are beautiful, the beggars and street urchins are all beautiful. And who really knows which are the true lovers of Allah? Only Allah Knows them. As the sacred saying states, *'My saints are under My domes and only I know them.'*

Hundreds of pigeons nestle on the green dome of the *Mazar* of Data Ganj Baksh, the soft sound of fluttering wings and gentle cooing enveloping the devotees beneath in yet another beauty.

'Allah manifested you in Australia but...'

* * * *

Six years after my initial visit to Data Saheb's I was taken to meet an old man, a very special old man, so I was told. I think he would prefer to remain anonymous therefore I will not mention his name. He owned a small teashop on a busy main road quite near the *Darbar* of Data Saheb. I was told that this old *chai wala* was somehow connected to Data Saheb. He was known to make a daily *ziyarat* to the *Mazar*. His love for Data Saheb was limitless. One day, within his heart, he requested Data Saheb to reveal himself. The following morning this old *chai wala* started out on his daily *ziyarat*. He climbed the stairs leading to the marble courtyard and when he looked towards the *Mazar* he was awestruck. All he could see was the wings of angels, thousands and thousands and thousands of angels' wings, spread over every inch of the courtyard, covering every millimetre of the *Mazar* and the green dome. He was humbled to the core. How could he have had the impudence, the audacity, the pride and boldness to ask Data Saheb to disclose himself! Look at the rank of Data Saheb! The old *chai wala* retraced his steps along the lanes and alleyways and along the main road back to his *chai* shop. He was ashamed. How could he ever dare to even set foot anywhere near the *Darbar* let alone climb the stairs and approach the Saint? He stayed away from the *Darbar* for three years. Then one day a presence approached him, enveloped him in his arms and told him to return. It was Data Saheb himself who had come to fetch him and bring him back! Data Ganj Baksh, the Bestower of Treasures.

My love for this old *chai wala* was instant from the moment my eyes met his. He was sitting beside his *chai* shop under a shady tree when we went to see him. As we walked towards him he smiled the most radiant smile at me. It was a smile of instant recognition. Then he cast down his eyes and spoke to the friend who had brought me. He said many words in Urdu. He said many things about me, wonderful things. He knew all about me. The eye of his heart, his *basirat*, was open. This man who had seen the wings of angels, said that I had been to the bottom of the ocean and I didn't even know where I had been or what I had done! And he told me to be happy, just to be happy! On my next visit to Lahore I went to him again. He asked me if I had been thinking of him. I told him I had and that often I could see his face in front of me. He smiled that radiant smile again and said he too had been thinking of me. Then he added, 'And I know that now you are happy!'

* * * *

On my second day in Pakistan we made a decisive journey, a long journey by road to a small town in the Punjab called Pakpattan Sharif. I knew nothing about Pakpattan Sharif, but my friends had been insistent upon us making the journey, all of them anxious to take me to the 'very special Mazar' of Baba Fariduddin Ganj-i-Shakar, a Sufi Saint about whom I knew very little.

Sugarcane was being harvested in the Punjab and the roads were blocked with trucks and tractors piled high with precariously swaying mountains of sharp cane. Yet, our mood was joyous. We were driving through sweetness. Surrounded by sweetness on our way to the sweetness of Ganj-i-Shakar. There are various stories related to this name Ganj-i-Shakar, meaning 'treasury of sugar or sweetness'.

As a young man, Baba Fariduddin undertook many austerities in his spiritual endeavour. On one occasion he fasted for three consecutive days and became weak and overcome by hunger. In order to allay his hunger he put some small pebbles in his mouth. They immediately turned into sugar. Another story relates as to how Baba Farid once met some sugar traders travelling by camel. He enquired what they were carrying. Now, these traders, being greedy merchants, did not want Baba Farid to know it was sugar in case he asked for some. So they replied that they were carrying salt. To which Baba Farid replied, 'Let it be salt.' When the traders reached Delhi they were astounded to find their camels loaded with salt. They rapidly returned to Baba Farid seeking his forgiveness for their deception. 'Let it be sugar!' said Baba Farid. And so the salt became sugar!

We were carefree and in high spirits as we drove through this sweetness. To prepare ourselves for the encounter at the *Mazar* we listened to the Sabri Brothers throughout the five-hour journey from Lahore. Our mood was joyous, almost intoxicated, as we reached the foot of the hill upon which spreads the blessed *Darbar* of Baba Farid. This was my first *ziyarat* to the *Mazar* of a Chishti Saint. A very significant visit!

We climbed the steep alley through the bazaar, leading to the entrance of the *Darbar*. As at Data Saheb's now at Baba Saheb's, past the sellers of rose garlands. Ah, that fragrance again! Past the sellers of *chadars* and *itr* and past the jewellery and cassette shops. Getting closer and closer. Climbing higher and higher. Steeper and steeper.

'Allah manifested you in Australia but...' Getting closer and closer to Hazrat Baba Fariduddin Ganj-i-Shakar.

* * * *

Fariduddin Mas'ud (Baba Farid) was born in 571 AH (AD 1175) in Kathwal, a town near Multan. His first teacher was his pious and highly spiritual mother. She kindled the fire of Divine Love within him, a fire that was to blaze brightly and dominate his entire being throughout his long life. As a young child he devoted himself to prayer and fasting. Once, an eminent mystic Shaykh Jalaluddin Tabrizi passed through Kathwal and found the young Fariduddin immersed in his devotions beside the town's mosque. The Shaykh offered Fariduddin the gift of a pomegranate, but because he was fasting he declined to take the whole fruit and accepted only one seed with which to break his fast. From this one pomegranate seed he received immense spiritual illumination. He regretted not having taken the whole fruit until his *Pir-O-Murshid* Khwaja Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki told him in later years, 'All the spiritual blessing was in that one seed; it was destined for you and it reached you. There was nothing in the rest of the fruit.'

The first time Baba Farid saw Khwaja Qutbuddin he was praying in a mosque in Multan. So overcome with emotion was Baba Farid that he kissed the feet of Khwaja Qutbuddin and begged him for the 'alchemy' of his glance. Then amidst a noble assembly of Chishti and Suhrawardi *dervishes* Khwaja Qutbuddin gave him his hand in initiation (*bai'at*).

It has been said that no saint has ever excelled Baba Farid in his devotions and spiritual asceticism. His long life was filled with prayer, vigil and fasting. He yearned to break down all barriers between his Lord and himself. Though he never sought fame, the very idea being abhorrent to him, he is renowned for one harsh discipline, the inverted *chilla*, (*Chilla-i-Ma'kus*). This he performed in Ucch Sharif. For forty days and nights he hung upside down in a well and devoted himself to constant *zikr*.

Baba Farid sat at his *Pir-O-Murshid*'s feet for many years in Delhi, traversing the stages of his spiritual journey. But he longed to flee to a place of tranquillity where he could devote himself entirely to Allah. When his *Pir-O-Murshid* Khwaja Qutbuddin tearfully gave permission for Baba Farid to depart he indicated that he would be his successor as

Head of the Chishti *Silsila*. In isolation Baba Farid continued his devotions and austere disciplines, yet he was not destined to live a secluded life. Wherever he went people flocked around him, seeking his blessings and guidance. His period of isolation came to an end and eventually he settled in Ajodhan, the present day Pakpattan Sharif, where he flung open his doors saying, 'Come to me one by one so that I may attend to you individually.' And devotees and lovers have been flocking to Pakpattan Sharif ever since, seeking his love and spiritual nourishment and receiving his *faizan*.

Throughout his life Baba Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakar would spend many hours of his nights in prostration ceaselessly reciting, 'I die for Thee and I live for Thee.' The great Chishti Saint breathed his last breath on the evening of 5 Muharram 664 AH (AD 1265). His last words were, 'Ya Hayy, Ya Qayyum' (O Living, O Eternal).

* * * *

We reached the entrance to the courtyard. The tall heavy doors were opened wide in welcome to all the devotees and lovers of the Sufi Saint. I removed my shoes, bent forwards and touched the threshold, placed my hands on my heart and my eyes—gestures of love, honour, and respect for the Saint. '*Allah manifested you in Australia but...*'

Stepping gently across the shiny green doorframe I entered the courtyard, the *Darbar*, of Hazrat Baba Fariduddin Ganj-i-Shakar. The marble paving was cool and the air fresh. I could feel my heart beating as I slowly advanced. I felt incredibly light, as though my feet were not even touching the ground. I looked around: the expanse of marble, that ancient tree, those ragged children and the blessed dome. Amazing! It was like a beautiful dreamscape yet it was all so familiar. I felt as though I had always known this place. The atmosphere was joyous and pervaded by love. I felt perfectly at peace. Surrounded by contentment. And to myself I softly whispered, '*I've come home!*' And, the welcome I received was that of a true homecoming.

A great overflowing of *barakat*, blessing, showered upon us. The *Mazar* whose inner sanctum is forbidden to women nonetheless seemed to beckon us and open its doors wide. And now in retrospect I believe that the Saint himself, Baba Farid, opened his arms in a loving embrace, an embrace within which I have been firmly held ever since! The guardian at the *Mazar* who must have had a keen and alert sixth sense, urged me closer and a little closer and yet closer still! We were almost

inside but not quite. That was forbidden. I kissed the silver step for the first time. There have been many times since then and *insha'Allah* there are many times yet to come! Garlands of those heavenly scented roses were lifted from the *Mazar* itself and ceremoniously placed around my neck! Why so much honour?

Gates were then unlocked and we were ushered into a small semi-enclosed room directly beside the *Mazar*. Here we sat before the two splendid silver doors, the *Bahishti Darwaza* or Gates of Paradise that open directly into the *Mazar*. After tranquil moments spent in contemplation and prayer, we were beckoned to follow the guardian. Come! Come!

We passed under a covered archway and into a dark room. I breathed in the heavy, heady fragrance of accumulated rose-petals and rose-drenched *chadars* recently removed from the *Mazar*. These pieces of cloth had absorbed into themselves an abundance of blessings, having been in close proximity to the great saint and the spiritual power emanating from him and his resting-place. A green *chadar*, permeated through and through with these celestial scented blessings, was taken from a large wooden trunk and placed in my waiting hands. So much honour! A true homecoming!

Outside in the dazzling radiance of the sunlight surrounded by smiling faces and many upturned hands, an extraordinary *faqirni* came to me. Dressed in black *shalwar qamis* with a green turban wrapped around her head, dozens of silver rings gleaming on both hands, she leaned towards me and whispered in Urdu, 'Now you can go away happy!' Who was she? I knew her! But of course, I had seen her in that memorable Sabri Brothers' video at the *Mazar* of 'Abdullah Shah Ghazi. She had danced in ecstasy in front of Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri as he sang a *qawwali* in honour of the great Saint of Sindh Hazrat Lal Shahbaz Qalandar.

I was given a message of heavy significance on this, my first *ziyarat* to Baba Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakar. As one of my companions sat in deep contemplation (*muraqaba*) within the inner sanctum of the *Mazar* his heart received a message from Baba Saheb. The words conveyed to his heart were, *'Amatullah may leave but ... I will keep her heart with me here in Pakistan!'*

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The interconnectedness of encounters and events is bewildering! I don't believe in chance meetings or coincidences. Our destinies are interwoven with the destinies of all the people we encounter on our journey through life. We must always be on the alert to read the indications and signs that surround us. Catch onto the thread! It is all a Divine Plan. A word, a glance, a meeting to bring us to the beloved of the Beloved of Allah *(fana fi-sh-Shaykh)*, and to the Beloved of Allah *(fana fi-r-Rasul)* and to Allah, the Beloved *(fana fi'llah)*. One simply has to flow into one's destiny, the easiest thing to say, yet the hardest thing to do. 'The Path is easy. It is man who is complicated!'

I met a tall gently spoken man. He and his companion had just returned from a visit to the *Mazar* of Khwaja Mu'inuddin Chishti in Ajmer Sharif, Rajasthan in India. Both were luminous with love! They brought with them the blessings of India's most exalted Sufi Saint. The man gave me a gift, a sacred yellow and red thread *(ghalawat)*, from the *Mazar* in Ajmer Sharif.

When I visited Ajmer Sharif the following year these yellow and red woollen threads were seen everywhere, around people's necks or on their wrists. The threads were tied to the filigree marble screens around the *Mazar* and onto the gates, by devotees seeking the Saint's blessings and answers to their prayers. Bundles of the yellow and red threads were displayed for sale in every lane and alleyway. The perfect gift to give loved ones when a devotee returns home after his or her *ziyarat*. Why the colours yellow and red? What is their significance? The sandy yellow colour symbolizes humility, like that of the earth. The red colour symbolizes *'ishq-e haqiqi* or True Love. These being the two qualities that the Mashaiyakh of the Chishtiyya *Silsila* strive to imbue into their *murids*.

As the man placed the yellow and red thread around my neck he said, 'You are a Chishti!' How did he know that I was a Chishti when even I did not know that I was a Chishti? At that time I was attached to another *Tariqa*, but he could perceive that I was a Chishti. He was a *murid* of Hazrat Shahidullah Faridi, an Englishman who embraced Islam in 1936 after reading Data Saheb's treatise on Sufism, *Kashf-ul-Mahjub*. Destined to become a Sufi Master of the Chishti Silsila, dedicating his life to his many *murids*, Hazrat Shahidullah was intimately connected to Baba Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakar. How strange that I had included so many extracts from Hazrat Shahidullah Faridi's writings in my first book *And the Sky Is Not the Limit*. And here was this man, his *murid*, telling me 'You are a Chishti!'

So many indications were coming to me. I was being drawn and attracted by the Chishti Saints. Invisible hands in the Unseen Realm were pulling the thread. In retrospect I can see the incredible linking of events and meetings, the tightening of the thread.

* * * *

It was almost time to fly south to Karachi for the long awaited meeting with the Sabris. But one more saint was calling me to his presence. I could not leave the north without giving my salaams to Hazrat Baba Bullhe Shah, the great Sufi poet of the Punjab whose ecstatic verses form an integral part of the *qawwals'* repertoire.

On our way to Kasur, a small town some distance from Lahore, our car had a flat tyre so we stood in the chilly wind on the noisy roadside till it could be repaired in the next village. One of my companions exclaimed, 'Baba Bullhe Shah doesn't want us to reach just yet!' Of course, the Sabri Brothers accompanied us all the way on the cassette player. Our spirits were soaring as we entered the town. With my two male friends I entered the *Mazar* of this intoxicated Sufi poet and as I stood quietly reciting *Fatiha* a guard approached me and abruptly told me to leave. I was bewildered! Men Only! Oh yes, yet another area where 'women are forbidden'. I was terribly upset, being disturbed in such a rough manner especially whilst reciting holy verses. And tears slipped from my eyes. Woman! Condemned to stand outside! My heart objected: *'There is no gender in spirituality!'*

What an ironical situation! To be ejected from the *Mazar* of a Saint who himself had been rejected by the surrounding orthodoxy in his own lifetime! But, I had only been in Pakistan for two weeks and was too shy and intimidated to stand my ground.

* * * *

Baba Bullhe Shah was born in AD 1680 in Ucch Sharif, the city of Saints, near Bahawalpur. At the age of six his father moved to Kasur, where Bullhe Shah ('Abdullah was his name) received strictly orthodox religious training. Bullhe Shah began writing poems of ecstatic love, not in sophisticated Persian but in the local Punjabi dialect. He also attacked the prevailing attitudes of the exoteric scholars of his time. His relationship with his *Murshid* Shah Inayat, of the Qadiriyya *Silsila*, is legendary. Shah Inayat strongly disapproved of Bullhe Shah's

'deviationist' poetry and warned him to abstain from these verbal attacks against orthodoxy. Bullhe Shah did not heed his *Murshid*'s advice. It is said that Shah Inayat turned Bullhe Shah away from his home. In the pain of his separation from his *Murshid* Baba, Bullhe Shah started playing the *sarangi* and singing and dancing. His yearning for true knowledge of Allah and his grief at being separated from Shah Inayat were poured forth in his poems. He came to his *Murshid*, singing and dancing, pleading to be forgiven. His poem, *'Teray 'Ishq Nachaya'* (Your Love Makes me Dance), a favourite in the *qawwals'* repertoire, expresses his desperate plight, his desolation and helplessness. Shah Inayat relented and took his disciple back again. *Bullhe* was *Bhulla* (lost) without his Murshid! In 1758, after Baba Bullhe Shah passed away, his dead body was laid out in the sun whilst the mullahs of the town argued, disputing his right to be buried in a public graveyard. Today the graveyard is in ruins yet the tomb of the Saint is a centre of blessings, where the privileged few pay vast amounts of money to be buried in close proximity to Baba Bullhe Shah, the man they once rejected.

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The guard may have treated me badly but the Saint Baba Bullhe Shah knew he had a guest from the other end of the world. He knew a lover was standing outside wanting to come in. A gift was handed to me from inside the *Mazar*—those heavenly rose-garlands—placed around my neck, a gift from the saint himself. As in Pakpattan Sharif so also now in Kasur: we were ushered across the courtyard, down a colonnade and into a small heavily padlocked room, thick with heavy fragrance. Here we were given the rare honour and privilege of touching and kissing the prayer cap and prayer rug of the Saint. And then, the ultimate gift from Baba Bullhe Shah, a green *chadar* from his *Mazar* was placed in my hands with respect and dignity. The abrupt dismissal from the *Mazar* was completely nullified by these acts of love coming directly from the Saint.

The Saints of Pakistan were showering me with love and blessings, drawing me into their hearts. I flew south to Karachi to the long-awaited destined meeting with Mehmood Ghaznavi Sabri and members of the extended Sabri family.

6

Full Circle to 'Abdullah Shah Ghazi Baba

Lapping expectantly around the Arrivals exit at Karachi airport—a sea of brown faces. I am so agitated, nervous and uncomfortable, pushing my loaded trolley amongst this crowd, feeling utterly conspicuous—a white Muslim lady! What will I ever say to Mehmood Sabri who is to meet me? How will I act? The moment has arrived and now I just want to flee the scene! Why oh why did I ever want to come to Pakistan alone? I am so stupid! Madness. Madness! But, too late to stop now! You must face the music and ... dance!

* * * *

Due to unforeseen circumstances Mehmood Sabri had been unable to meet me at the airport. I was respectfully greeted by members of Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri's family and quickly whisked away in a silver-painted 1960s limousine to the heavily congested and over-populated suburb of Liaquatabad. As I stepped through the door to the Sabri home, his daughters placed garland upon garland of those fragrant red roses around my neck. Haji Saheb's widow, daughters and sons all welcomed me like a long lost sister and showered me with generosity and affection. My bags were carried into a separate room specially prepared for me. 'This is our father's room. It is your room.' The room of Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri! Needless to say I was totally dazed. Me, to stay in the room of such a great man, a man whom I considered and still consider a Saint.

Hours later Mehmood and I finally met—in the room of Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri. This is where the destined meeting was to take place, under the watchful gaze and spiritual presence of Mehmood's big brother! In retrospect I understand why we did not meet at the

Airport. Impulsively I pulled a book from my suitcase. It was an Urdu book about some Sufi Saints and it contained a beautiful glossy photo of the *Mazar* of Hazrat Alauddin Sabir in Kalyar Sharif, India. When I showed the photo to Mehmood he immediately kissed it and pressed it to his eyes. I gave him that book. This was my initial direct experience of the immense love and respect that the Sabris have for all the Sufi Saints.

As I write these words in 2004, I look back and feel that somehow, a major change has occurred in my life after each *ziyarat* to Baba Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakar in Pakpattan Sharif. It is as though each *ziyarat* has been a turning point, a landmark or monumental obelisk on my spiritual horizon. Or a pull on the thread! It was after my first *ziyarat* that I met Mehmood Sabri and his brothers.

In the pitch darkness of one of Karachi's frequent power breakdowns, I first met Haji Kamal Sabri, the elder brother with the husky rough voice. Mehmood had to shout into his near-deaf ears that it was 'Amatullah from Australia' Forty years of amplified *dholak* drumming had taken their toll on Kamal Saheb's eardrums. Kamal embraced me warmly like a daughter and when the lights eventually came on I was utterly enchanted by his eyes—love simply poured forth from them. The following day I met Haji Maqbool Ahmed Sabri, the leader of the group, a small man with the delicate hands of a maestro. He had suffered greatly, several years earlier, in a near fatal motorcycle accident which left him with a severely damaged leg. Doctors had given him a five per cent chance of surviving but Allah had given him one hundred per cent certainty of surviving! The Sabri Brothers had to continue their mission of spreading the Message of Love to the world.

Exactly one year earlier, back in Australia, in another insightful dream I had seen the grave of Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri, a simple white marble slab. In the dream I asked Haji Kamal Sabri for permission to visit the grave to sit in meditation and receive *faizan*, inspiration and divine overflow. Haji Kamal's reply had been, 'Yes! He knows you are coming. He is expecting you and is waiting for you.' Then, still in the dream, with the eye of my heart I look at the grave. Upon the white marble slab I see a beautiful large Holy Qur'an. Each page is golden silk and upon each golden silk page the Words of Allah are written in celestial blue. A slight breeze blows gently, moving the sacred pages.

In Karachi I slept in the room of Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri. In my diary I wrote more passionate and emotional words:

How can I sleep when I am in this room? Sleep is minimal. All I can think about is him. He is spiritually present with me. So much noise from the surrounding lanes and alleyways! All night long. And as soon as the *azan* for *Fajr Namaz* is called the streets are filled with the loud sounds of vendors' calls! Haji Saheb lay on this bed listening to these sounds. But apparently he also slept little. His nights were filled with the *zikr* of the Name Allah. Why has Allah brought me here? What am I doing in his room using his 1000 bead *tasbih*? The same *tasbih* he wore on the video recordings! What is the purpose of this? It goes far deeper than writing a book about him. I know that for certain. Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri, what is my connection to you? Tomorrow I will come to you, to your *Mazar*. You know I am coming. You will be waiting for me.

* * * *

Inexpressible sadness. Bereft and lost, I sit beside his *Mazar*, the simple white marble slab I had seen in the dream of the previous year. The tears flow. They will not stop. Tears become sobs. Finally I am at his side, all the way from Australia. I hear Mehmood's voice behind me, 'Oh! So many tears! So many tears!' He too is extremely moved.

The sadness comes back to me, the despair that I experienced in 1995 when I learned that he had passed away. Too late! Never to be! Not in this realm, anyway. I kiss his *Mazar* and rub my *tasbih* over the white marble. *Dervish* Mehmood hands me a cup of hot sweet tea and with utter simplicity softly says, 'Haji Saheb has invited us to tea!'

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The passing away of such a great Pakistani *qawwal* was a momentous event in the history of Eastern music. *Qawwali* would never be the same without him. Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri passed away on the 5th of April, 1994. A close family member told me he died of a heart attack. To my question, 'Did he suffer?' she replied, 'No my dear! He didn't suffer. It was very quick. Oh! If we could all die like he did. It was beautiful, just beautiful.'

On that fateful day in 1994 the streets and lanes and alleyways of Liaquatabad had been packed tightly with mourners for his funeral prayers. Many said, 'The *Noor* (the Divine Light) has now left Liaquatabad!' Mehmood gave me his account of what was for him a devastating experience.

'We were going to England the next day,' related Mehmood. 'I was with Haji Saheb. I had dinner with him. We were talking about the tour. Then Haji Saheb said to me, 'Mehmood, you had better go home to sleep. You look tired. We have a big day tomorrow.' So I said '*Assalamu alaikoum Allah Hafiz*' and went home. Early the next morning there was someone banging on my door, before *fajr Namaz*. They banged and banged and I told them to go away. Then I heard my nephew's voice. I opened the door and he said, 'Uncle Mehmood! Haji Saheb is dead!' My God! Oh no! Haji Saheb. Dead? Oh! Amatullah! I had been sitting with him just a few hours ago. Haji Saheb! Haji Saheb! Haji Saheb!'

He passed away only weeks after returning from Umra with Haji Maqbool. Mehmood further related, 'When I heard that my brothers were home from Umra I rushed around to Haji Saheb's home to greet him. He was praying. I went into the room. There was Haji Saheb. He looked so beautiful. He was growing a beard. I had never seen him with a beard before! He was standing there praying, saying '*Allahu Akbar*'. I looked at him and oh, Amatullah! I remembered a statue of Sayyidna 'Isa that I had seen in Spain. And I thought, 'Haji Saheb is like Sayyidna 'Isa!' He looked so beautiful. Amatullah, you must put this in your book!'

He had passed away in a car that was taking him to the hospital, beside him was his beloved brother Haji Maqbool. Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri, the man who could transport an audience to spiritual heights when saying the Sacred Name, Allah! Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri exhaled his departing breath, a breath that would transport his own spirit to the other side!

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On 20 February 1998, the Sabri household awakens early to prepare for this most important day. It is 23 Shawwal 1418, marking the fourth anniversary of the passing away of Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri. I can hardly believe that I am present in Pakistan, in Karachi, in the Sabri home itself, for this blessed occasion! The ceremonies are due to commence in late afternoon but first the home must be scrubbed and polished and made to shine. It is Friday. I look for a special place to say my prayers. Having chosen a spot to spread my prayer mat I am told by one of Haji Saheb's daughters, 'This is where my father used to pray!' After praying I say my *zikr* on his 1000 bead *tasbih*.

Throughout the ceremonies of the late afternoon and night I am the honoured guest, having come all the way from Australia for the fourth anniversary. Ladies gather in one room and men in another for silent recitation of the Holy Qur'an. And it is here, in Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri's home that I have my first live experience of *qawwali*—not Sabri *qawwali* though, another group of *qawwals*. And it is here that I begin to learn the *adab*, the spiritual courtesy of attending a *qawwali mehfil*. Mehmood guides me through that initial experience. Coming to me as I sit near the musicians, he puts several currency notes in my hand, leads me forward and together we give the offering, *nazrana* to the *qawwals*. He then circles my head with more notes letting them flutter down upon the heads of the *qawwals*. Spiritualised money. Blessed for the one who gives, the one over whom it is circled and for the ones who receive.

As soon as the *qawwali* concludes, groups of us move off in a convoy of vehicles to the cemetery, the Paposh *Qabristan*, in nearby Nazimabad. Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri's grave is situated near his father's grave in a peaceful courtyard. In the centre of the courtyard is the *Mazar* of Herat Shah Warsi with its distinctive yellow walls and *chadars*. Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri had been initiated into the Warsiyya *Tariqa* by Herat Shah Warsi's *khalifa*, Amber Shah Warsi. Photos of the initiation ceremony adorn the walls of the Sabri home. The initiation ceremony differs from other *tariqas* in that instead of the usual oath of allegiance *(bai'at)* at the hand of the *Murshid*, the initiate is clothed in an unstitched brilliant saffron garment known as *ihram*. The name bestowed upon Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri within the Warsiyya *Tariqa* was Alam Shah Warsi. Both of his names are engraved upon the white marble of his grave. Warsiyya is a branch of the Chishti *Silsila*.

As evening descends, we gather for more *qawwali* around the *Mazar* of Herat Shah Warsi. The women are segregated in an enclosure at the back but through Divine Grace I am invited to join the men. Firstly, *chadars* are placed upon the Warsi *Mazar*, and then, many *chadars* of varying colours, glittering, shining with sequins and satin are spread respectfully over the humble white marble *Mazar* of Haji Saheb. As fate would have it, the place where Haji Saheb now lies buried, to the side of the Warsi *Mazar*, was once his favourite place for singing *qawwali*.

I am enchanted, enthralled, enraptured by this spiritual spectacle. Amongst the gathering are beautiful men of the Warsiyya *Silsila* with

saffron robes wrapped around their lean brown bodies and long flowing locks streaming over their shoulders. Each one of these Warsi *faqirs* emanates a subtle luminosity. Incredibly gentle people are the Warsiyya!

The *qawwali* continues with new groups arriving, performing and then making way for the next group. To complete my intoxicating experience, a golden *chadar* is removed from Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri's *Mazar*, carried across the courtyard to where I am sitting, and then draped around my shoulders.

> Roses shine in the clay beside your tomb.
> Be aware earth, who sleeps inside you.
> – Mevlana Rumi in *Birdsong*

The night grows old and the *mehfil* concludes and we return to Liaquatabad for the blessed meal. Mehmood reappears, wanting to take me to his own *qawwali mehfil* with his own *Pir-O-Murshid*. I am up and ready. '*Chalo!* Lets go!' Together we walk to a rickshaw and then splutter off into the night to 'Babaji's' *astana*.

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I first became aware of Mehmood's *Pir-O-Murshid* in 1997 when I saw him on an amateur video recording sent to me by Mehmood immediately after our initial phone conversation. I was perplexed, trying to fathom what this videotape was all about. It documented Mehmood's *Murshid* and his many *murids* on an excursion to a river on the outskirts of Karachi and the subsequent *mehfil* in a nearby home.

This was my first glimpse of Baba 'Abdul Razzaq Raza Shakoori Malangi Chishti, lovingly called Babaji. Just one glimpse, yet, without my awareness, something profound was triggered off in the depths of my heart.

Babaji, dressed in a bright rich green *kurta*, swam in the waters of a wide river. It was as though he belonged in this liquid environment, so natural was his frolicking, so radiant his smile. Pure joy radiated from his brown face with his thick grey hair, dripping-wet. Rolling and somersaulting in the rippling water, diving deep here to reappear over there! Many of his male *murids* joined Babaji in the river. The women remained on the dry land, though some I noticed did dangle their feet

into the shallow waters at the edge. Faces at that time unknown and now so familiar! In the background the unmistakable sounds of *qawwali* played incessantly as these spiritual companions shared the pleasure of cool waters enveloping their bodies.

The video then documented an intimate traditional Sufi *mehfil* in which Babaji, sitting in the place of honour and respect, was surrounded by devoted male *murids*. The women gathered nearby, screened behind a curtain. This was the first time I ever heard Mehmood singing solo, without his elder brothers. This was not Mehmood Ghaznavi Sabri, the youngest of the Sabri Brothers, sitting on the sidelines of the *mehfil*! This was Mehmood 'Majnun' (as Babaji named him) as lead *qawwal* singing with his *Pir* brothers for the sheer pleasure of their beloved Babaji! This *qawwali* was distinctly different from that of the Sabri Brothers. The poetry was Babaji's. I watched and listened. Another firm tug on the thread! An unfolding had just begun.

Six months later, soon after my arrival in Karachi, Mehmood took me to meet his *Pir-O-Murshid*. Babaji's *astana* was deep inside the twisting and intricate network of narrow alleyways of Osmania Colony.

Following Mehmood along the weaving passages, we passed curtained doorways screening darkened interiors of small homes. Grubby smiling faces of tiny children greeted us at every corner. Wide innocent eyes filled with wonder at the rare spectacle of a 'gori', a white lady, visiting their neighbourhood. Stepping over open drains and rubbish, the occasional tethered goat bleating, high-pitched voices and deep murmurs, we went deeper inside the maze. Reaching a heavy embossed curtain with sandals and slippers scattered on the floor beneath, Mehmood and I slipped off our shoes and entered the humble *astana* of the *faqir*, Baba 'Abdul Razzaq Raza Shakoori Malangi Chishti. Joining several brothers who lounged easily on the floor of the first tiny room, Mehmood introduced me. Two women wearing green *chadars* greeted us warmly and served sweet hot *chai*. Shafts of soft sunlight filtered through a portion of the open ceiling.

The place was tiny, no more than ten feet by ten feet, yet there was space for us to sit comfortably. Words were spoken in low tones. Mehmood's mood was delightful here with his *Pir* brothers and sisters in the *astana* of his Babaji. His deep constrained laughter actually seemed to emphasize the tranquillity of this spiritual space, hidden away as it was in the centre of a labyrinth. Visitors with veiled faces

appeared through the curtain and moved away quickly into the darkened room beyond.

Mehmood was waiting for *the* moment to take me inside to meet Babaji. Eventually the women concealed under heavy black *burqas* left the inner room. From his relaxed position on a pile of green cushions, Mehmood peeped around the corner into the interior. Baba*ji* was alone. 'Come on Amatullah!'

Within the dark room Babaji reclines on the floor on a piece of matting. He smiles radiantly as Mehmood, his 'Majnun' rushes to his feet, kneels, bows low to place his lips upon the extended hand covered with gem-studded rings. Softly spoken words pass between *Murshid* and his *qawwal khalifa*. I am presented to Babaji. The connection is made. Hands touch. Eyes meet. Heart speaks to heart.

In a bright green *kurta* with dozens of bangles and bracelets glistening on his right wrist, Babaji utters gentle phrases in English. His hair is grey but the clarity and smoothness of his brown skin make it impossible to guess his age. More tea is brought to us, and sweets. Babaji places one large piece of sweetmeat directly in my mouth. Mehmood whispers, 'You are very lucky Amatullah!' This is a great blessing indeed. *Bahut barkat*.

The walls are literally covered with photographs of sanctified men and sacred places. Two faces dominate: an old man with a long white beard and a piercing gaze, his frail body lightly covered with a thin cloth, and an incredibly gentle bearded man whose liquid eyes are focused on another dimension, another realm of existence, with his *tasbih* in his hand. I was later to learn that these blessed human beings were Babaji's *Murshids*, Qazi Baba of Sukkur and Shakoor Malang Baba of Peshawar.

Babaji the faqir is a true *Murshid*. In a world inhabited by numerous spiritual frauds and fakes masquerading as men of exalted states and stations, Babaji is real and true. Babaji is immersed in love of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). His ecstatic poetry bears witness to his adoration. Babaji is always giving, giving more and more. No one leaves Babaji's *astana* empty hearted or empty-handed. On this, my first visit, Babaji hands me several currency notes. Blessed money. *Tabaruk*! I had never before encountered such a thing. Prior to this in other places, the *murids* had been the ones to give to the *Murshid*. But, things were reversed here in the *astana* of Baba 'Abdul Razzaq Raza Shakoori Malangi Chishti.

Since that time I have encountered many people of the Sufi Path who exclaim 'If he asks for money he is not a true *Murshid*. O No!' Having learned through bitter experience about the zigzag ways of the pseudo-Shaykhs these wise people gave me clear warnings.

Mehmood and I prolong our time in his presence, basking in Babaji's light, soaking up the blessing. *Murids* come and attend to Babaji's needs whilst new visitors enter seeking his *du'as* and blessings and the power of his breath to cure their various ailments and relieve the sufferings of life.

The sun descends. The *Azan* for *Maghreb* prayer is called. We all disperse to offer our prayers. Babaji, the *'ashiq-e Rasul*, remains in his humble abode of tranquillity immersed in the perpetual Remembrance of Allah and contemplation of His Beloved.

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I had come to Pakistan to undertake intensive research into the art of Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri, yet I did not actively go out seeking information and gathering material. My so-called research programme was utterly passive. I simply let each day take care of itself. No direction, just wait and see what happens, I would tell myself. Maybe this has something to do with the very atmosphere of the Subcontinent. When I recently read Peter Lamborn Wilson's 'Chishti Reminiscence' in *A Pearl in Wine* I was amused because he too never took any notes. This is understandable though, as his was a 1960s hippie journey, quite different from mine. I soon learned that there is no point in planning anything in Pakistan. Whatever one plans never seems to eventuate so it is best to remain open and receptive, and flow along, just as the great thirteenth century Egyptian Sufi Saint, Ibn Ata'Illah says in his *Book of Wisdom (Hikam)*,

> When the forgetful man gets up in the morning, he reflects on what he is going to do, whereas the intelligent man sees what Allah is doing with him.

Scattered fragments of old memories and recollections were filtered to me from the various people I encountered. One man related how he had been present at a very significant Sabri Brothers' *mehfil*. 'It was a case of the chicken and the egg,' he said. 'Ambar Shah Warsi and Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri. I saw them at a *mehfil* when Haji Saheb was

singing *Ya Muhammad Nur-i-Mujassam*. Ambar Shah Warsi was an elder of Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri in the Warsiyya *Silsila*. As Ambar Shah Warsi was being showered with *Nur* (Divine Light) he kept passing it on to his junior Haji Saheb.' This transmission of Divine Inspiration was what I would love to have witnessed.

Another gentleman expressed his admiration for the great *qawwal*. 'When Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri says 'Allah' the Name comes right from inside him. He has to let out that Name. He cannot keep it inside. No one else can say it like he did!'

'He was a holy man.'

'He was a saint.'

'Haji Saheb was something. I cannot say what his spiritual status was but he was high.'

'He was a *qalandar*!'

When people would come to him asking for his *du'as* and for *tawiz* and he would say, 'Why do you come to me? Why me? I am just a man. It is Allah. Allah!'

I was told that in his youth Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri had wanted to turn away from the world and go into the wilderness, exclaiming, 'What do I want with the things of this world. I want only Allah!' His mother's stern rebuke turned him back to his responsibilities. And by far the greatest responsibility given to him was to spread the Message of Divine Love throughout the world.

A story started to circulate through certain quarters of Karachi, and maybe even further afield, that I had embraced Islam after hearing the Sabri Brothers. I don't know where the story originated but perhaps this is how history gets distorted—fiction becomes accepted as fact. Myth, fable and legend are acknowledged as truth. I embraced Islam in 1984. My first book *And the Sky Is Not The Limit* relates the whole story. I first heard Sabri Brothers in 1994. However, and this is the crucial point, my experience of the Sabri Brothers took me far deeper into Islam than did the initial step ten years earlier. Embracing Islam had been sweet and refreshing. The impact of the *sama'* of the Sabri Brothers had set fire to my heart. Those ten intervening years had been preparing me for the moment, the stirring of the hidden memory of the pre-Eternal day of *Alast* when Allah Almighty had asked each and every one of us, *'Alastu birabbikum?' (Am I not your Lord?)*.

* * * *

Before leaving Pakistan with the Sabri Brothers to accompany them on their 1998 tour of Australia, I had one vitally important *ziyarat* to make—to the *Mazar* of Hazrat 'Abdullah Shah Ghazi, affectionately called Ghazi Baba. It was his *Mazar* I had seen in the decisive dream years earlier, the place from where this beautiful spiritual connection started to unfold.

* * * *

Hazrat 'Abdullah Shah Ghazi was born in 98 AH in the blessed city of Madina in Arabia. Due to the political upheaval of the times his respected father Syed Muhammad Nafs Zakia sent him to Sindh in AD 138 to spread the message of Islam. During his twelve years in Sindh many people heard his call and entered Islam, therefore Sindh is the place from where Islam spread throughout the entire subcontinent. Political turmoil raged in Madina and Basra with many intrigues, arrests and murders. 'Abdullah Shah's father was murdered in Madina in 145 AH and there was an order to arrest 'Abdullah Shah in Sindh. In the ensuing conflict 'Abdullah Shah Ghazi was martyred in 151 AH. His companions fled with his body to a village by the sea and buried him on a tall hill.

Hazrat 'Abdullah Shah Ghazi's miracle is the fountain of sweet cold water that flows in abundance from a spring at the foot of the hill upon which stands his *Mazar*. It is said that after his *murids* buried Hazrat 'Abdullah Shah they wanted to live close to him but were troubled by the lack of pure water. They prayed to Allah and during the night 'Hazrat came to one of them in a dream to inform them of the well of sweet water at the foot of the hill. To this day people flock to the Miracle Fountain, *Chashma-i-Karamat* to drink the water for spiritual blessings, and to cure various ailments.

* * * *

On the other side of Karachi, high on a cliff top is the *Mazar*, overlooking the sea on one side and the city on the other. It is architecturally quite strange with its grey and white zigzag striped exterior, yet it is spiritually profound. Bathed once again in the intoxicating fragrance of the humble red rose garlands in my arms, I climb the long steep flight of stairs. Salaams and litanies and recitations and *du'as* to the Saint, then garlands are laid across the *Mazar* piled

high with many *chadars*. I descend and follow the path around to the lower side of the cliff where there is a spring of miraculous water. From this I drink.

I must now find the exact place of that Sabri Brothers' 1986 video, the place I had seen in my dream. In my dream I had passed through a door but that door had not been visible in the video, so I wondered whether there really was a door there or not. I am intensely excited about this door. Is it there or isn't it?

The traditional location for *qawwali mehfils* is quite close to the spring and at the time of *Urs* it is tightly packed with crowds of devotees and lovers. I walk on the bare earth through this space, now empty and silent except for the flapping of wings as stray chickens run away squawking at my intrusion. One or two urchins follow close on my heels, asking for money.

At the end is the platform upon which the Sabri Brothers had played their *qawwali*. And there, just to the side, now clearly visible, is ...the door. Yes! There is a door and splashed across its surface in rough Urdu script is the word *Malang*. Malang, the one who is drowned, lost, annihilated in his love of Allah.

I had come full circle, back to 'Abdullah Shah Ghazi Baba.

High upon the cliff top: the Mazar.
Green flags fluttering in the breeze.
Welcoming. Joyous. Sanctuary.
Haven for the poor, the heartbroken and sick.
How many times I have climbed
that long steep flight of stairs leading to your door!
Seeking tranquillity. Direction. Protection.
Ya 'Abdullah Shah Ghazi Baba!
Showering Karachi and her inhabitants
with blessings and love!

* * * *

I flew to Australia with the Sabri Brothers. Strange that I should experience their first live concert in Australia. During my two weeks in Karachi I had merely sat-in on their low-key practice sessions. I wondered what they would be like without Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri.

An earlier diary entry:

> It was Haji Saheb who attracted the angelic presences. He was the empty vessel through whom the Divine Light had poured forth into the earthly realm. I believe Haji Saheb was not only a qawwal. He was a waliullah and a qawwal. He was a great qawwal because he was a waliullah! He radiated light and love. It was his spiritual reality that injected his every breath, his every word, his every silence, his every glance, his every expression with so much beauty and power. No one can utter the Name Allah as he did! He could not hold the power of the Name inside. He could not contain it. It would build up energy and he had no alternative but to exhale that one, glorious, intoxicatingly beautiful breath carrying the most sacred Name. And upon that breath the blessed receptive hearer would ascend! His voice released the most intense yearning, the most unbearably painful beauty and the most sublime rapture. He would drown. We would watch him drown. And we would drown with him!!

Their first concert was at the Perth Festival. The Sabri Brothers were still great. Undoubtedly. But there was an empty space, a silence where Haji Saheb should have been. I waited expectantly to hear his voice, his breath. It could still be heard—within the depths of my heart! Yet, Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri was still there with his brothers. The space that he left behind him became an entity in itself. I felt that the power of his physical absence actually made his spiritual presence stronger.

One night we stood on a terrace of the Sydney Opera House, overlooking one of the most spectacular harbours in the world. City lights and stars reflected and twinkled on the calm waters. They had just given a stirring performance, enchanting Pakistanis and Australians, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. There certainly was magic still within the Sabri Brothers. The Australian audiences loved them. I quickly perceived an immense energy hidden within Haji Maqbool Ahmed Sabri, the Maestro of classical *qawwali*, engulfed in celestial sounds. *Qawwali* was his spiritual nourishment and so was his audience. There was a powerful two-way communication, back and forth between Sabri Saheb and his admirers.

Mehmood Ghaznavi Sabri, the youngest brother and now second *qawwal*, sat quietly at the sidelines, observing perfect *adab*, courtesy towards his elder brother who was also his *ustad*, his teacher. He was sitting quietly and waiting for the right moment, to emerge from the shadow and stand alone as a *qawwal* with a divinely inspired voice.

My link with Haji Kamal became very strong at this time. He had developed a severe case of double pneumonia and remained hospitalised in Adelaide for two weeks. When the tour was over, their visas had

also expired and the Sabris returned to Karachi, leaving Kamal Saheb to recuperate under the care of Australian doctors and nurses. I went to my home in Brisbane, phoning the Adelaide hospital daily to check on his progress. Leaving my bag packed, I hurriedly made arrangements to return almost immediately to Pakistan. Then bidding farewell I boarded the plane and met up with Kamal Saheb at Singapore Airport and together we travelled to Karachi.

It was a decisive flight taking me away from the familiarity of my former life to the wonder of unknown places to enter an amazing dance of destiny whose melody enchants and whose choreography enraptures. And, even if I wanted to stop dancing and leave the dance floor, I don't think I could now! The music lingers on and... the voice...!

> This music will never fade nor the dance wind down till the end of Eternity,
> for what we desire is infinite.
> The lover whispers,
> 'As I opened my eyes
> I saw your face;
> I heard your voice
> as I listened.'
>
> – Fakhruddin 'Iraqi

I had been swept away on a great wave of celestial music notes on the ocean of *'ishq*, a wave that would carry me back to the Land of the Sufi Saints, where Baba Farid-ud-Din Ganj-i Shakar had conveyed the message, *'Amatullah may leave but I will keep her heart with me here in Pakistan!'*

7

'I will keep her heart with me....'

I celebrated my first Eid al-Azha in a Muslim majority country. It was a powerful experience, so different from the unassuming and low-key festivals in Brisbane with its minimal Muslim community. For several days before the Day of Arafat, the streets of Karachi were filled with herds of goats and sheep, cattle and camels, waiting to be purchased and slaughtered for the *qurbani*. These decoratively garlanded animals were tethered in lanes and alleyways outside homes until the time of the sacrifice. An extremely sobering sight!

I was staying in the home of a friend and one of her sons performed the slaughter. Over-sensitive, I was unable to watch. 'It will prepare you for the *jihad*!' I was told. 'I will engage in the *jihad* against the *nafs* instead, thank you!' I remained in my room until those blessed yet painful moments of sacrifice were over. In my past I had witnessed the deaths of so many of my loved animals. Still I could not bring myself to watch this *qurbani*. Two years later when a butcher sacrificed my own goat for me in Karachi I forced myself to watch the cut of the knife and the agony of death. But I was not yet ready this particular year. A heavy silence hung over the streets of Karachi, heavy with the meaning of the sacrifice.

Throughout the three days of Eid there was fighting in Liaquatabad where the Sabris lived. Mehmood phoned. 'Listen Amatullah, can you hear the gunfire?' The tiny lanes and alleyways were totally unsafe, forcing everyone to stay indoors. Bullets even penetrated the walls of an upstairs' room in Mehmood's home. This was political violence. Fighting over the skins of sacrificial animals. Opposing political factions fought, shot and killed their brother Muslims in order to win their rightful skins. And here in the midst of this madness live the Sabri Brothers, men of Allah who had devoted their lives to spreading the beautiful message of Peace and Divine Love to humanity.

Today, six years later, as I write these words there has been more violence. Three people were killed in nearby Jamshed Road. Shops are heavily shuttered and streets empty of rickshaws, buses and cars. Vehicles have been set on fire. Thick, black, noxious smoke billows into the atmosphere. Shattered glass is strewn everywhere from the rioting crowd. I cannot venture outside till tomorrow. And here, in the midst of this continuing hostility, we continue to live!

* * * *

I attended many *mehfils* with the group, meeting Sufi Shaykhs and their *murids*. This side of the Sabri Brothers' life was utterly different from the glamour of international tours and performances in prestigious concert halls throughout the world. Here in Pakistan they usually played their *qawwali* in its traditional setting at the *khanqahs* and *Mazars* for the spiritual uplifting of the devotees. This was where they received the spiritual nourishment that enabled them to take the message outside Pakistan for others to imbibe. *Khanqah* and concert hall, both aspects of their artistic, creative, and spiritual life are vitally important, both aimed at bringing joy and solace to humanity, everywhere.

It was nearing the month of Muharram. Time to go to the *Urs* of Baba Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakar. Before dawn we boarded the train at Karachi's Cantt. Station for the long journey to Sahiwal, the railway station closest to Pakpattan Sharif. This was my first of many physically uncomfortable but spiritually exhilarating journeys with the group. It was like a dream come true for me, travelling with the famous Sabri Brothers, sharing their lives, their experiences.

We had been at a *mehfil* the previous night so none of us had slept. As soon as the train pulled out of Karachi we climbed into our designated bunks and within minutes all were sleeping soundly—except me trapped on the bottom bunk. In economy class carriages there are three bunks in a space that ideally should have only two. So, space is minimal. One cannot sit on one's bunk. One just has to lie flat whether one is sleepy or not. Now however, as a seasoned Pakistani train traveller I can easily fall asleep on a bunk or on the floor or sitting up or just about anywhere.

The journey continued. I managed to sleep a little. Some members of the group stirred, woke up, played cards. We drank *chai* and ate biscuits. Slept again. All the while the train wheels beating out their

rhythmic message on the steel tracks like a *zikr*, *'Allah Hu, Allah Hu, Allah Hu'* or the beats of a tabla, *'dah tirkit tirkit tirkit dah na dah na dah tin tah'*.

We reached Sahiwal railway station at about midnight. Carrying our bags to a nearby cluster of roadside hotels we settled on *charpoys* to wait for the dawn bus to take us to Pakpattan Sharif. Dishes of steaming food and rounds of *roti* were distributed with copious cups of *chai*. These hotels under the enormous shady tree at Sahiwal station are very special for me. Each year we relax there on our way to and from the *Urs*, the shady tree being witness to moments of immense spiritual significance in my life. And each year I give salaams to that tree!

Our bus pulled out of Sahiwal just as the *Azan* was being called for dawn prayers. We travelled for about half an hour and as we approached the blessed town of Pakpattan Sharif all the devotees on the bus started the chant, *'Haq Farid! Ya Farid! Haq Farid! Baba Farid!'*

* * * *

An *Urs* celebration is an amazing phenomenon. A multitude of lovers and devotees gather, each reciting sacred verses for the Saint at his *Mazar*. Thousands of *chadars*, an abundance of flowers and sweets are placed upon the *Mazar* each day. The *Mazar* and courtyard are filled with the fragrance of love and devotion. So much love is poured upon the Saint during the days of *Urs*. And the Saint reciprocates, he is bountiful and he bestows more and more favours on his people, sending *faizan*, inspiration and love to his lovers. The Saint is in a munificent mood. This day is the anniversary of his union with his Beloved, his return to the Source. The Saint is very generous and loving. A friend of mine, an incredibly gentle lady who is a descendant of Shaykh Baha'uddin Zakariyya of Multan, expressed it very sweetly. 'Baba Farid is very kind!' Absolutely.

Qawwals from all over Pakistan and India flock to the *Urs* of Baba Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakar. During the first few days of Muharram, Pakpattan Sharif reverberates with the rhythms of *qawwali*. At night the *Mazar* is decked out in bright flashing coloured lights, strung like pearls around the dome. *Urs* is a wedding festival, celebrating the moment when the Saint is finally united with his Beloved, so the *Mazar* is beautifully adorned like a bride. From evening prayers through till dawn prayers the *qawwals* sing for Baba Saheb directly facing the shining silver doors of his *Mazar*. A constant stream of *qawwals* with

harmoniums balanced on shoulders, flows up the steep laneway to the *Darbar*. New *qawwali* groups come in the hope of getting a chance to play, waiting to be discovered and soar to fame like the Sabri Brothers or Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan!

We are accommodated in a home at the foot of the hill in an area where most of the *qawwals* reside. Narrow cobbled lanes with open drains and charming houses with ancient timber doors and iron locks and chains. After a price is agreed upon the local families happily vacate their homes to make way for the visiting *qawwals*.

Mehmood takes me everywhere on this, my first *Urs* in Pakpattan Sharif. As we mount the long flight of stairs to the *Darbar* he recalls that we are following exactly the same route that Haji Saheb took on his last *Urs*. We meet countless friends. Drink endless cups of *chai*. Wander along the meandering alleys that surround the blessed precincts.

At night I accompany the Sabri Brothers to the *Darbar*. They surround me so that I too can squeeze through the crowd of ecstatic devotees to sit with them for their performance. Thousands of lovers are present at the *mehfil*. The *Darbar* is packed. As Haji Maqbool Ahmed Sabri's name is announced we push our way through. Hurriedly *tablas*, *dholaks* and harmoniums are unpacked. I am sitting, huddled tightly behind Anwar, the *tabla* master. Sabri Saheb and Mehmood take their positions and then the Kings of *Qawwals* enchant the devotees with their magic! Unbelievable that I, all the way from Brisbane in Australia, am sitting with them. Encircled by devotees, engulfed in celestial music, with the blessed *Mazar* of Baba Farid ahead.

Many Sufi Shaykhs and *Pir-O-Murshids* sit in ceremonial manner. They are spiritually stirred by the music and song. *Nazrana* is thrown high into the air to flutter down upon the *qawwals*. Tears flow as the Sabris sing words of praise for the Holy Prophet (PBUH). It is said that those who are spiritually mature do not allow the intensity of their ecstasy to become visible. They are the ones who are inwardly intoxicated, outwardly sober. But such people are rare. The Sabris start singing about Baba Farid. There is one Sufi Shaykh overwhelmed with love. And he's not trying to hide any of it! A tiny, thin, frail old man dressed in green, carrying a long cane in his hand. This is Baba Kassim Shah Faridi from South Africa. The green Shaykh gently dances in his ecstasy as the Sabris sing. His dance is subtle and understated even though there is probably a volcano erupting inside him! He dances and whirls and twists and spins, somewhat jerkily yet ever so gracefully,

up to the silver doors of the *Mazar*. Then he turns and dances back to the Sabris to shower them with *nazrana*. Baba Kassim Shah Faridi, lost in the ocean of *'ishq*.

When the Sabri Brother's *qawwali* is finished I follow Mehmood across the marble courtyard to the silver doors. He kneels and kisses the threshold. I kiss the cool walls. A fine mist of fragrant rose water is sprayed over us as we mingle and weave our way through the crowd to emerge on the distant side of the *Darbar*. Then outside into the lane we relax for *chai* in the ancient stall on the hillside.

But Baba Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakar had not called me all the way from Australia only for the *qawwali* of Sabri Brothers. He had other messages for me too. Baba Saheb sends signs. Of this I am certain.

The atmosphere of the *Urs* was enchanting. Having come from a clock-oriented society in Australia where appointments, diary entries and time schedules govern the day, it was magical to simply wander without direction through the days and nights of the festivities. It was on one such occasion of aimless carefree meandering that Baba Saheb sent me an indication, a message.

As we were climbing the hill beside the *Darbar*, up past the old *chai* shop, I had a flashing thought. A fleeting question darted into my mind, hit its target, and then departed as quickly as it had arrived. *'What if? What if? What if I left everything in Australia and came here, to live, permanently?'* This country, this town, this *Darbar*, these people, the Sabri *qawwals*, this *dervish qawwal* at my side, the devotees, the Sufi Shaykhs, the simplicity of life, all of this was where I felt utterly at home. *'What if? What if?'* Never before had such a seemingly crazy notion entered my head. But here in Pakpattan Sharif Baba Saheb was sending me a very clear sign of an imminent and totally unexpected event in my life!

* * * *

During the *Urs* I was somehow urged, coaxed and persuaded to deliver a talk at a seminar. On the morning of the seminar I met with a small group of men, scholars and government officials and devotees. We shared breakfast together. The atmosphere was relaxed and I found it easy to talk, exchanging views and ideas about *Tasawwuf* and *qawwali*. I was assured that the seminar would also be equally intimate. So, in an easy mood I returned later in the day to attend the seminar. I was so sure that it would be another close gathering. To my dismay the large

room was filled with men. A lectern stood, solemn and alone, at one end. A video camera and blindingly bright lights were in place ready to record my every word and gesture. Needless to say I froze. I can't remember what I said. I think I spoke about transformation of the self. I was transformed into a block of ice, a block of ice that was burning inside with shyness and fear! I fled at the first opportunity, muttering under my breath, 'Never again will I do this. This is a big lesson. Never again!'

I had forgotten this painful incident until recently when, in 2002 I was sitting in the Sultan Bahu *Masjid* in Johannesburg in South Africa. I then recollected that my first dismal talk had occurred just behind the *Mazar* of Baba Farid. I had declared 'Never again!' Yet, there I was, as the specially invited guest from Pakistan, delivering a talk to the ladies. And amazingly, on that particular night, the men had actually been barred from the mosque! How did I receive an invitation to visit South Africa? This story must be told because this too was Baba Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakar's plan! It happened like this:

In 1998 as I had been meandering through the lanes and soaking up the joy of my first *Urs*, a young man from Pietermaritzburg in South Africa had also been walking in the same alleyways of Pakpattan Sharif searching for Amatullah Armstrong. Having heard that I was at the festivities with the Sabri Brothers, he tried desperately to find me. Apparently, years earlier, when he read my first book *And The Sky Is Not The Limit*, he perceived that I was a Chishti at heart. Yet another person who knew that I was a Chishti! He had decided that I must come to South Africa to talk with the ladies of the Sufi Path.

But, as hard as he tried in 1998, he did not find me at the *Urs*. So, feeling a little daunted, he stood within the *Mazar Sharif* of Baba Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakar and supplicated, 'Baba Saheb, you must bring Amatullah Armstrong to me. I cannot find her so you must bring her to me!' Baba Saheb heard his *du'a*. But the young man had to wait for quite some time.

Four years later in 2002 this same young man was at Baba Saheb's *Urs*, and I was also there with the Sabris. And once again he searched for me in the maze of lanes and alleys that surround the *Darbar*. In the wee small hours of the morning he roamed through the area where the *qawwals* reside. But I was not to be found by searching!

Then late one night, as the *Urs* was drawing to a close, two women stopped me as I hurried down through the mass of devotees in the steep alley outside the *Darbar*. They took me back up the hill to meet a

young man who was waiting beside a stall piled high with glittering *chadars* and packets of pale golden sugar, *shakar*. 'Yes! It's her!' they exclaimed eagerly. I was very curious and intrigued by their agitation.

This young man with the serious yet sparkling eyes was Shah Irshad Soofie, the great grandson of the Sufi Saint Hazrat Soofie Saheb. In South Africa, Soofie Saheb's *Mazar* overlooks the river that flows through Durban and the pinnacle of its dome is the same pale gold as the sweet *shakar* in Pakpattan Sharif. Pale gold, the colour of humility.

Irshad told me that when he saw me, the *gori* (white) *malang*, hurrying through the *bazaar*, his hair stood on end and he said to himself, 'That's Amatullah!' This was his last night in Pakpattan Sharif and despite all of his searching he had not found me and had given up all hope of doing so. But it was his *du'a* of four years earlier that had been answered and Baba Saheb had brought us together directly outside the doors to the *Darbar*. It was a beautiful meeting, a strong connection with a true spiritual brother.

What I am trying to convey here is just an indication, a taste of the sweetness that is to be experienced at the *Mazars* of the Sufi Saints in the Subcontinent. Things happen at these blessed places. Love. Joy. Abandonment. Spiritual connections. Bliss. And a deep yearning. Mevlana Rumi says, *'There's no cure but the taste of what the saints pass round.'*

* * * *

My last days of my first *Urs* in Pakpattan Sharif are blurred. I am dreadfully ill. Fever. Delirium. Sleep. Surfacing every now and then only to go back into restless sleep. I miss many prayers. Time means nothing. *Azan* follows *azan* and I am unable to move from my bed.

Mehmood and the group are worried about me. I am under their care and protection and they take this responsibility very seriously. Mehmood tells me to pack my things. His *qawwal* friend will accompany me in the bus to Lahore to recuperate. 'And we meet you next week in Jhelum.' 'Yes! Yes! Of course Mehmood!'

I am ready in ten minutes. Filling myself with charcoal tablets in the hope that I make it all the way to Lahore without any problem. I feel revolting, so grubby and so sick. It is now drizzling. Mehmood carries my bag. We go to a tiny *chai* house and climb into the seats at the back.

Subhanallah! The spiritual journey is so profound! Moments of stark awareness. The weakness of the earthly body opens a channel to a state of higher consciousness. *Allah Karim!* I am a slave. Yes! Allah is turning me whichever way He Wills! I sit in the damp atmosphere. I am ill but not fragile. I have strength still. Mud and rain outside in the street. *Chai* is brought in dirty cups. Mehmood goes and buys a paper bag filled with biscuits. We sit drinking *chai*, eating biscuits in the damp drizzle of Pakpattan Sharif. The *Rahmat* of Allah. Mehmood is talking to someone. In Urdu. I am not listening. Just staring ahead. But what is this I am staring at? I am watching the man who makes the *chai*. He is squatting at the front of the shop and he is washing something. I can't comprehend what this thing is that he is washing! I stare. He is washing ... the head of a dead sheep in a bowl of water. He is scrapping and scrubbing the head. I am a slave. I am totally aware. Ya Allah! Rain. Sickness. Mud. The head of a sheep! Dirty cups. And ... *dervish* Mehmood who rises above it all! 'Why are you worried? Ever be happy!'

Outside again I climb up into the horse and cart. It is time to bid farewell. My heart is sad. I don't want to leave. I don't want to leave the magic of this place. I don't want to leave the totality of the experience. I don't want to leave this *dervish qawwal*. But we will join up within a week up north. I don't want to leave Baba Saheb!
'Allah Hafiz' 'Allah Hafiz!'

The cart pulls away and makes its way down through the winding bumpy streets to the bus that will take me away from the Blessed *Urs* of Baba Farid in Pakpattan Sharif.

* * * *

What work had Baba Saheb designated for me after this, my first *Urs*? What was I required to do? Which obstacle had to be removed from my path? After recovering from my illness I joined Mehmood and some group members in Islamabad for *ziyarat* and *qawwali mehfils*, then made an arduous 30-hour train journey back to Karachi in readiness for my return flight to Australia. The *'What if? What if?'* though was soon to manifest. *'What if I left everything in Australia and came here to live permanently?'*

My PIA flight departed from Karachi's Jinnah International Airport at six o'clock on a sweltering humid morning in late May 1998. As the plane taxied to the runway I experienced an intense sadness and

contraction of heart. Solitary traveller on the mystic path of return to the Source! I was leaving Pakistan, land of the great Sufi Saints. Looking down through the haze onto the dusty greyness of the sprawling city beneath I knew I would return soon. But first I had to clear certain things that were blocking my path.

Baba Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakar had sent me away but he was keeping my heart with him in Pakistan.

8

'There's no cure but the taste of what the saints pass round'

On the plane journey to Brisbane I reflected upon the months spent in Pakistan. And I quickly realised that each day of life as a traveller in the Subcontinent had brought with it a growing awareness of a previous inner imbalance. Vital qualities had been absent in my life prior to visiting Pakistan, the quality of compassion, which is the very heart of Islam and that of love, the essence of *Tasawwuf*. The more contact I had with the Pakistani people, the more I came to understand just how meagre my compassion and love for Allah's humanity had been throughout the years in my first *tariqa* in Australia when I had devoted myself almost entirely to *zikr* and *fikr*. But, perhaps this is as it should be because Pakistan was destined to be the earthly setting for this particular awareness to unfold.

Pakistan ripped me apart and opened me up to an inflowing and an outpouring. Love flowed to me from so many people. And I reciprocated with a great outpouring of love and compassion for them. Everywhere I went I encountered raw, beautiful, sad, joyful, exultant, desolate, dignified, impoverished humanity. Pakistan changed my entire life. Sufism had to be a dynamic reality. It had to be lived.

Back in Australia after my Pakistani experience, surrounded by comparative opulence and things in excess, I felt like an alien, no longer belonging. Pakistan may have been covered with a blanket of dusty greyness but the richness of her spirituality shone through. Australia, outwardly brilliant and shining, was inwardly bereft of any mystical wealth.

Like a fish on dry land, I waited for another great wave from the ocean to sweep me once again out beyond my depths. I was miserable and homesick. But I continued to hang on to that thread. I was longing to return to Pakistan and her saints and their lovers. *'There's no cure but the taste of what the saints pass round.'*

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During this period of transition, the only solace I could find, the only relief from the mental and spiritual unrest, was the *qawwali* of the Sabri Brothers. My obsession with them had not abated. It had grown even stronger since my departure from Pakistan. And it was this obsession that urged me to make the final break with all my ties to my so-called homeland. The Chishti thread was pulling me back to the land of the great Sufi Saints. Strangely, as Pakistan was drawing me closer, everything in Australia seemed to be rejecting me! The prevailing conditions were actually making it unbearable for me to stay on. The Divine Plan was really making it easier for me to bid farewell to my homeland. There wasn't anything to hold me back there, except my trepidation about actually making the break and perhaps my clinging on to old notions of how things should work out. But, there were 'guides and spirits' along the path, facilitating and smoothing the way.

Throughout this time of turbulent change, I sought guidance and advice from a Pakistani Sufi Shaykh who lived in the USA. Via telephone conversations and fax messages, this humble and unassuming Shaykh showered me with such loving tenderness and compassion, care and concern. His heart was reaching out to mine as he endeavoured to console me, trying to ease the pain and heal the wounds. I related the details of my dreams and experiences to him. It was his blessed fax response that finally clarified my position vis-à-vis Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri.

His words refreshed my heart and spirit like purified rain from heaven. *'You are on the way of Love and this is superior to all other ways.'* He congratulated me *'for being selectively accepted and connected with the Silsila Chishtiyya'* and confirmed my already firmly held conviction by saying *'Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri is your Murshid and he will guide you with his love.'* And he added, *'Should you need a living Murshid Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri will point your heart in that direction.'*

All I had to do was wait for the winds of Fate to blow me back to Pakistan. And for the thread to pull me in!

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The golden dome of the *Mazar* shone with a delicate lustre on the fiery crimson of the sunset horizon as we approached the town of Sehwan Sharif in interior Sindh. It was my destiny to spend the last day of 1998 and the first day of 1999 at the *Mazar* of Hazrat Lal Shahbaz Qalandar. The direction of my new life in the land of the great Sufi Saints was sealed!

My host on this journey was a gentleman devoted to Baba Farid Ganj-i Shakar and Lal Shahbaz Qalandar. Throughout the entire eight-hour journey from Karachi to Sehwan Sharif, he played only one *qawwali*, over and over again, on the car's cassette player. It was a very old Sabri Brothers' recording of a *qawwali* about the *Urs* of Baba Saheb in Pakpattan Sharif. I think this endless *qawwali* reduced the other passengers in the car to a state of exhaustion. But I was high and full of energy. We stopped for lunch in Hyderabad where I was taken to meet a very old man whom I was told was a living Saint. His name was Ghulam Mustafa Khan. Many people were waiting in the antechamber of the large building anxious to have an audience with Khan Saheb. I was the only woman there. Khan Saheb greeted me and graciously accepted copies of my books. I had not wanted to give my little books to such a great scholar but my host on this journey had insisted that I must. Ghulam Mustafa Khan humbly presented copies of his own books to me.

We reached Sehwan Sharif at sunset. The only thing I knew about Hazrat Lal Shahbaz Qalandar was that the Sabri Brothers sang about him. Nevertheless my lack of knowledge of the Saint did not deter him from calling me to his presence. When I entered the *Mazar* my attention immediately fell upon a small old *dervish* sitting on the bare floor reciting the Holy Qur'an. A green shawl was draped over his shoulders and a small green turban wrapped around his head. He looked at me. I looked at him. It was electrifying. After saying *Fatihah* and making *du'a* beside the *Mazar* of Hazrat Lal Shahbaz Qalandar I sat at a distance behind this old *dervish* hoping to catch some of his *barkat*, blessing. He knew I was there. Timidly I approached him, sat directly in front of him and asked him to make *du'a* for me. He did. Was this old *dervish* one of the thin filaments in the thread!

> Someone said, 'There is no dervish, or if there is a dervish,
> that dervish is not there.'
> Look at a candleflame in bright noon sunlight.
> If you put cotton next to it, the cotton will burn.

But its light has become completely mixed with the sun.
That candlelight you can't find ... is what is left of a dervish.
– Mevlana Rumi in *We Are Three*

But if you put a stone beside that candleflame nothing will happen. Only dried up cotton or paper will burn!

* * * *

Hazrat Lal Shahbaz Qalandar was born in 538 AH in Marvand in the district of Tabriz in northern Iran. His mother was a princess and his father a nobleman. At an early age he devoted himself to studying the Holy Qur'an and as he grew his desire to follow the Way of Divine Love fired his poetic genius. Like so many of the great Sufi saints, Lal Shahbaz travelled widely. Three of his eminent spiritual companions were Baba Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakar of Pakpattan Sharif, Hazrat Baha'uddin Zakariyya of Multan and Syed Jalaluddin Bukhari of Ucch Sharif. It is said that the four went to Mecca together. (This must have been a journey in the spirit because it is known that Baba Farid never made a physical journey there.) Outside of Sehwan Sharif is a cave named Yak Thumbee in which it is said Baba Farid and Syed Jalaluddin would visit Lal Shahbaz. And in Ucch Sharif is a small cell, *hujra*, in which the four companions are said to have sat in deep meditation, *muraqaba*.

There is a lovely story told about Lal Shahbaz's entry into Sehwan Sharif when he was 111 years of age. As he arrived in the town, the many saints already living there sent him a cup of milk—indicating that there was no place for him, the town was full to the brim with saints. Lal Shahbaz Qalandar placed a rose on the milk and returned it whence it had come. This was his indication that his presence would add elegance, fragrance and glory to the town. And it did! Lal Shahbaz passed away in Sehwan Sharif in 650 AH at the age of 112.

* * * *

Whilst I was in Sehwan Sharif, a friend in Karachi, anxious about my whereabouts, was seeking advice from a Shaykh of the Naqshbandiyya *Silsila*. 'Don't worry about her. She is fine in Sehwan Sharif,' he reassured. 'But when she returns tell her she *must* go to Pakpattan Sharif because something is waiting for her there!'

* * * *

For several months after my return to Pakistan I led a gypsy-like existence, sleeping on floors in the homes of various friends, visiting Baba*ji* and other Sufi Shaykhs, attending Sabri *mehfils* and generally enjoying myself as we explored Karachi. After the turmoil back in Australia, all thoughts of research programmes had faded into the background and I simply flowed along letting each day unfold afresh. I was continually amazed by the hospitality and generosity of the Pakistani people. Being such famous *qawwals*, the Sabri Brothers were able to move freely across a wide range of social classes. Consequently Mehmood's friends and acquaintances came from every strata of Pakistani society. So it was not unusual for me to spend the day with a member of an Indian Royal Family in fashionable Clifton and the night with a poor family of eleven in a single room in Liaquatabad. Yet in both extreme cases the generosity and hospitality were of the same degree, whether eating delicate samosas and drinking tea from a samovar or sharing a common plate of rice and drinking from cracked cups.

I have a fond memory of one such visit to an exceedingly poor family. The mother and her many daughters were all lovers of the Sufi saints. They owned nothing. Their room was empty of possessions but filled with *Nur*, spiritual light. With her white *chadar* wrapped tightly around her head the mother sang for me, just for me. She sang a song in praise of the Sufi Saints. Her face was only inches from mine and her tear-filled eyes gazed directly into mine as she was carried away on the waves of her emotion. These people did not complain about their deprived circumstances. They were utterly content with the situation in which Allah had placed them. And together we sat on the floor of their small upstairs room sharing a meal from a single plate, a great feeling of love flowing between us, brought together through our love of the Sufi saints.

But often I craved isolation and a space of my own. Not so easily found in overpopulated Karachi. A diary entry notes:

> O dear! This Pakistani extended family situation is very difficult for me coming from a Western nuclear family. Whenever I open a book someone is looking over my shoulder to see what I am reading. Whenever I put pen to paper someone is asking what am I writing. Whenever I am sitting quietly someone is asking me what I am thinking! It must be very difficult and stifling for one with a free spirit and for one who is by nature introspective

and solitary. There's no room to move, to breath, to contemplate. I find it suffocating – everyone living in such close proximity. It is amazing how so many spiritually inclined people and so many saints and sages have come from this environment! This is a dilemma. No, it is interesting. Maybe the claustrophobic atmosphere of the family makes one stronger. The ability to go inwards is greater because it requires a greater effort to get there. I don't know! There's so much noise and so many distracting influences. And so many babies!

But it came as a great shock to me to discover that certain people held very poor opinions of *qawwals* and musicians in general. *Qawwals* were considered to be 'beyond the pale' by many bourgeois Muslims. I was astounded to realise that certain people actually looked down upon them. The very idea of marrying a *qawwal* was unthinkable, unspeakable! I was amazed and unable to understand why these great artists whose music and voices could transport others to the spiritual realm should be held in anything but high esteem! 'Playthings of the elite' was how Mehmood often laughingly described himself and his fellow *qawwals*. But it is people from every strata of the society that hold this view, not just the bourgeois and the so-called elite. They love the *qawwali* but don't want to know about the *qawwals*.

I am not talking specifically about the Sabri Brothers though in the early days they too had to struggle to survive. They had to devote themselves entirely to their art in order to attain the supreme heights that they were destined to reach. Yet, I did occasionally encounter people who even held negative attitudes towards these wandering 'troubadours' of Divine Love, these Ambassadors of Pakistani Culture. My experience of this was first hand.

Hazrat Inayat Khan, the great Sufi Master of India, who took the Sufi Message to the West at the beginning of the twentieth century, said, 'The more the musician is conscious of his mission in life, the greater service he can render to humanity.'

Often I heard the complaint, '*Qawwals* only think about money!' Surely *qawwali* is one of the most honourable and noble ways of earning a living—singing the Praises of the Divinity for the spiritual uplifting of humanity. I have been present at numerous *qawwali mehfils* where the Sabris have been overwhelmed with love. Tears literally pour from Haji Maqbool Ahmed Sabri's eyes. And Mehmood says that at times he is momentarily 'blind', so powerful is the spiritual state that descends upon him whilst he is singing! Again, in Hazrat Inayat Khan's

words, 'When it intoxicates those who hear it how much more must it intoxicate those who play or sing it themselves.'

The message of *qawwali* is profound. The mission of the *qawwal* is profound. When *qawwali* is taken out of its traditional setting of the *Mazars*, or out of its homelands of the subcontinent, to be played for non-Western audiences, the impact can be astounding. How many hearts have been opened to Islam through Sabri Brothers' *qawwali*? How many seeds have they planted within the hearts of their Western non-Muslim audiences, seeds that could sprout at anytime! Who can know what inner yearnings have been set in motion through the power of Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri's utterance of the Divine Name 'ALLAH'! It is an elitist attitude to criticise *qawwals* for taking their art out of the traditional setting and placing it before the public. If the Sabri Brothers had remained within the *Mazar* and *mehfil-e sama'* environments, I and so many others would never have tasted this sweetness.

Apparently when Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya was only twelve years of age it was a *qawwal* who triggered off his love for his *Pir-O-Murshid* Baba Farid. He overheard a *qawwal* named Abu Bakr talking (not even singing) about Baba Farid and his *khanqah* in Pakpattan Sharif. Immediately Nizamuddin Awliya felt the spiritual connection. The first time I ever heard Baba Farid's name was in a Sabri Brothers' *qawwali* when they sang, *'Haq Farid! Ya Farid! Haq Farid! Baba Farid!'* I was drawn irresistibly to Baba Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakar and when I reached his threshold I knew I had 'Come home!'

The *qawwals*, coming from the congested areas of Karachi and other cities, where they live with their large families and numerous dependants, work through the long hours of the night and into the morning. Their days become nights and their nights become days. Whenever I visited their extremely humble homes, bereft of everything except a few cups and blankets and of course harmoniums, the *qawwals* and their families spoke with such love of Allah and His Messenger, and were totally devoted to the Sufi Saints. Yet these people don't need to be defended. They are simple and gracious people who have shown me the warmest affection and utmost respect. I have always felt totally protected and cared for when travelling with them. And that is really something! I enjoy being in their company more than any other people in Pakistan.

* * * *

Fortunately I was able to make a visit to Multan, Kathwal and Uch Sharif, but at that point in time I was not fully aware of the immense significance of these places. Besides, the visit was very brief, with no time to immerse myself, spiritually. As yet I haven't had the opportunity to return to these places. Or to put it correctly, I haven't been called back there again. Not yet anyway. I travelled without the Sabris on this journey. So the journey was one of sobriety in the company of restrained people. In Multan I made *ziyarat* to the imposing *Mazar* of the great Suhrawardi Shaykh Baha'uddin Zakariyya. Music is forbidden within the precincts of the *Darbar* but there was one lone *qawwal* and a *tabla* player (*tabalchi*) sitting at the gate. As I approached, he started singing Sabri Brothers' most famous *qawwali 'Tajdar-e Haram'*. Did I have 'Sabri Brothers' written all over my face or was the *qawwal* a mind reader? Of course, I was thrilled and gave them many currency notes. And of course as I was leaving the *Darbar* they instantly started singing it again in the hope of receiving more money, which I gave readily.

* * * *

Shaykh Baha'uddin Zakariyya was born in Multan in 578 AH (AD 1182). He was a descendant of the Meccan tribe of Quraysh to which the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) belonged. He was a man of immense spirituality. Whilst returning overland from his pilgrimage to Mecca, he met Shihabuddin Suhrawardi in Baghdad and was initiated into the Suhrawardiyya *Silsila*. Baha'uddin Zakariyya was an extremely wealthy and opulent man. In Multan he lived a sumptuous and lavish life like that of a nobleman. This was in complete contrast to the austerity and simplicity of the *faqirs* and *dervishes* of the Chishti *Silsila*. Baba Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakar lived only a few hundred miles away in Pakpattan Sharif. At the *khanqah* in Multan, separate accommodation was provided for each disciple whilst in Baba Farid's *khanqah* in Pakpattan Sharif all *dervishes* lived, prayed and slept together on the floor of a large hall. Baba Farid's kitchen was open for everyone. Baha'uddin Zakariyya's was not. Baba Farid was accessible till midnight for all visitors who flocked to his *khanqah* whereas in Multan the Shaykh's doors opened only for appointments. Baba Farid refused personal gifts and positions from the Sultan. Baha'uddin Zakariyya accepted gifts and was appointed on the official post of Shaykh-al-Islam. Yet Nizamuddin Awliya always referred to his *Pir-*

O-Murshid, Baba Farid, as Shaykh-al-Islam! Perhaps much of Baha'uddin Zakariyya's renown was because of one of his *murids*, the great ecstatic poet Fakhruddin 'Iraqi, who was part of his *khanqah* for twenty-five years.

* * * *

I then visited a *Mazar* around which there is much controversy. Some say it is the *Mazar* of Shams Tabrizi, the ecstatic *dervish* who opened the spiritual realities for Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi. Others say it is a *makam* of Shams Tabrizi, a place that he once stopped at on his travels. Yet others say it is another saint named Shams Tabrizi and that was my belief at that time. People of the Mevlevi *Silsila*, and they are the ones who would know, say it is a *makam* of the *real* Shams Tabrizi. How different my *ziyarat* would have been had I known this at the time! It is a tranquil blue and white *Mazar* under shady trees.

I visited Kathwal, the town in which Baba Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakar was born. There I made *ziyarat* to his father's *Mazar* beside the mosque where it is said Baba Saheb was given that single pomegranate seed containing immense spiritual illumination.

Ucch Sharif is stunningly beautiful. An ancient city of impressive architecture situated beside a fertile valley of palms and lush gardens. The buildings, now in ruins, still emanates a scent of grandeur, with remnants of blue and white decorative tiles shining in the sunlight on the disintegrating domes and walls. Yet, for all the decay, Ucch Sharif is enchantingly beautiful, romantic and spiritually profound. As soon as I alighted from the car, a *malang* attached himself to our small group, offering to guide us. This gentle *malang* told me that he had been stationed at Data Saheb's *Mazar* in Lahore but had recently moved to Ucch Sharif to partake of the spiritual blessings. Ucch Sharif is where Baba Farid undertook his torturous inverted *chilla*, hanging upside down, for forty days, suspended by the feet, in a well. I was taken to a well, which was said to be the one. And I was taken into a small *hujra*, a cell, in which it is said Baba Farid, Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, Baha'uddin Zakariyya and Syed Jalaluddin Bukhari used to sit in deep contemplation. The *hujra* was in great need of repair and restoration, so one of the gentlemen in our party arranged for its continuing maintenance.

Before departing from Ucch Sharif I made *ziyarat* to the *Mazar* of Syed Jalaluddin Makhdum Bukhari. He was the head of the *Silsila*

Sadat Karam. He received *khilafat* from his ancestors, the Imams of the family of the Holy Prophet. He also received a robe of *khilafat* from Sheikh Ruknuddin Suhrawardi, the grandson of Hazrat Baha'uddin Zakariyya, and the robe of *khilafat* from Khwaja Nasiruddin Chiragh Delhevi, the *khalifa* of Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya. It is recorded that Syed Jalaludin received robes of *khilafat* from as many as one hundred and forty *Masheikh* of the Sufi *Silsilas* during his long journeys through the Muslim world.

The entire journey was all too brief and I was too fresh at that time. I hope to be called back again one day to Multan, Kathwal and Ucch Sharif. I particularly hope to return to the *Makam* of Shams Tabrizi!

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Chishti-Mevlevi Connection

The story is told how in Konya, on a cold night, Jalaluddin and Shams were secluded in their cell, immersed in the ocean of *'ishq*, burning in its fire, lost in the depths of Divine Love. On this blessed night in the middle of a Turkish winter, they received a gift from the Unseen Realm. It was a flower.

Jalaluddin pushed the flower under the door, to his worried wife who was waiting outside, a reassurance that all was well within the cell. But his wife was perplexed. Where did Jalaluddin get such a rare flower, never before seen in Konya? After much searching and questioning many merchants she discovered that this delicate bloom grew in the hot land of India.

A gift arriving in Konya from faraway India via the Unseen Realm! A gift from the Chishtis to Mevlana! Did the *faqir* and lover Baba Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakar send this blossom to the great lover Jalaluddin?

I met a man in Lahore. His only words to me were, 'Baba Farid and Rumi are connected. You must go to Konya. Shams is there—everywhere!'

But Shams is everywhere here too!

There is a Chishti-Mevlevi Connection. That is why Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi's poetry is scattered throughout this book.

* * * *

Once again it was Muharram, a new year, the time for the *Urs* of Baba Farid. And once again I travelled north by train with the Sabri Brothers. This was my second *Urs*. There is immense energy of love in Pakpattan Sharif at *Urs* time. Worries, cares and problems vanish as one lives in the moment, in the ever present now, in the presence of the great lover, Baba Faridùddin Ganj-i Shakar. Nothing else matters. There is only the joy of sharing the experience of the *Urs* and extending love to everyone.

The Sabris sing a wonderful *qawwali* about this *Urs*.

Oh why do you worry, slave of Farid?
All of your difficulties will disappear of their own accord.
Just put your forehead on Baba's threshold and say,
'We are the slaves of Sabir and we have come to you!'

As we wandered in the lanes and up through the *bazaar* there were salaams from many people and gifts of fragrant itr, steaming hot *chai*, prayer beads and bracelets. The heart expands when in such surroundings. Capture the joy, hold it within and then let it pour forth on others. That is *Urs*! That is Sufism.

As with my first *Urs* so with this, my experience was a total *qawwali* experience. Immersed in the fervour of love. Surrounded by loving people. Engulfed in the energy of love, with moments of sweet repose floating on gentler waves, subdued and tender. Relishing the flowing of the moments.

We drifted along, in a deliciously relaxed mood, as we had the previous year. Talking with friends, absorbed in *qawwali*, enveloped in the fragrance of red roses and open to flashes of great elation. Perhaps the most blissful moments were those spent under the star-filled velvet sky, on the hillside of bare earth, drinking the sweetest *chai*, engulfed in clouds of tobacco smoke, gazing down into the crowds of devotees entering and departing from the *Darbar*. Strings and strings of coloured lights blinking upon the walls of stone as the sounds of *qawwali* soared into the heavens to fall upon Pakpattan Sharif in a shower of joy.

This year I was accommodated in a home whose inner walls were actually the outer walls of the *Darbar*. Baba Saheb was very close indeed. I merely had to walk along a tiny path, out into the *bazaar*, take a few steps up the hill and I was within the blessed courtyard in front of the *Mazar*. Very close to Baba Saheb! One night I had a wonderful dream about Mehmood and his *Pir-O-Murshid*, Baba Abdul

Razzaq Raza Shakoori. I considered it a blessed sign from Baba Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakar. And I remembered the words of the Sufi Shaykh in USA, *'Should you need a living Murshid Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri will point your heart in that direction.'*

As we progressed through the days and nights of celebration, I perceived an ever-increasing inner agitation, something new and strange and previously unknown. Initially a slight flutter, like the rush of adrenalin, it then developed into great surges of yearning. Was this Baba Saheb's *faizan*? Baba Saheb was sending me signs, of that I was certain. I listened carefully to my heart.

Standing outside the *Darbar*, Mehmood and I were given some blessed leaves to eat, leaves from an ancient tree within the *Darbar*. The woman, one of Baba Saheb's servants, who had collected the leaves for us, said, 'When you eat these leaves whatever *du'a* you make will be answered!' We ate those leaves and made our *du'as*.

And so, on the final night of the *Urs*, the tenth of Muharram, spiritual connections of profound meaning were made directly in front of the shining silver doors of the *Mazar*. The answer to my *du'a*! 'The heart finds the heart.' This was the 'something' that was waiting for me in Pakpattan Sharif.

The Saint and his devoted lovers had intoxicated me! *'There's no cure but the taste of what the saints pass round.'* Yet, there is no way of describing the taste of this sweet wine. One has to taste it for oneself. There are thousands of lovers tasting this wine, right now. The words in this book merely point the way to the taverns of Love where the wine is poured.

> From beyond the intellect
> beautiful Love comes
> dragging its skirts,
> a cup of wine in its hand.
>
> – Mevlana Rumi in *The Way of Passion*

* * * *

Outside of Pakpattan Sharif, in the countryside, is another *Mazar* of another Saint. I had one of the most bizarre experiences of my life at this *Mazar*. We all made the journey in horse drawn carts called *tongas*. It was late at night and the ride was deliciously refreshing with the cool breeze and the crystal clear star-filled sky and the clip clop of the

horses' hooves on the quiet country road. We were hoping that the Sabris would be able to play their *qawwali* for the *faqir* who lived at the *Mazar*. I was told he was a *majzub*, one utterly lost in the ocean of Divine Love under the Divine Attraction. I'd never actually been in the presence of a real *majzub* though there are many who look like *majzubs* parading around most *Mazars*. Who is real and who is not, only Allah Knows.

The *tongas* stopped some distance from the *Mazar*. In the darkness of the countryside we walked the remaining half-kilometre through a small makeshift village of *charpoys* and *chai* shops and hotels and sleepy eyed dusty devotees and *malangs* and *dervishes*. After our salaams and *du'as* at the *Mazar* we inquired about the *majzub* who was known as Ali Mahi. We were then led to another low building surrounded by trees and *charpoys* with many people waiting to see Ali Mahi.

Then we heard an indescribable sound. The most extraordinary and unidentifiable noise was coming from within the building where the *majzub* lived. A totally mysterious scrapping metallic cacophony like I knew not what! The noise would continue for some minutes and then subside. Then it would start again with added momentum. 'What is going on in there', I thought to myself. Then to add to the weirdness of the situation, Mehmood started to hide all of his jewellery, his amber beads and silver bracelet and rings. He put them inside his kurta and then buttoned it up tightly to the neck. 'What *are* you doing?' Apparently this young *majzub* was known to take whatever caught his eye or his fancy. And Mehmood didn't want to lose his jewellery. I was hoping Ali Mahi wouldn't take a liking to any members of the group or me! That strange metallic scraping, scratching, rasping noise! There were other sounds issuing forth also. Voices raised in joy and happiness. Clapping of hands and song. A man drew close to us as we waited on the *charpoys* and whispered that we could come inside to see Ali Mahi.

The *majzub*, Ali Mahi, was young, perhaps in his early twenties and he was the size of a Japanese sumo wrestler. He had a round face with sparse whiskers and cropped hair. His fat legs, protruding beneath his trousers, were covered with huge sores. Apparently he spent most of his life in a bathtub filled with water, such was his spiritual state. Ali Mahi was sitting on a large low lounge with dozens of people crammed into every available space about him. I glanced around the room but still couldn't discover the source of the metallic clamour. Mehmood

checked again that his jewellery wasn't visible. Ali Mahi looked at his room full of guests through eyes glazed with the madness of Divine Attraction. He couldn't say any coherent words, just a few grunts and inarticulate sounds. Then he would smile and laugh and the entire group of people would laugh with him.

Then the scraping sound came again! It was coming from another small room, an alcove at the side. The alcove was completely piled high with a mountain of empty tobacco tins with decoratively painted lids. Metal scraped on metal as one of Ali Mahi's followers waded through this mountainous sea of tobacco tins, selecting and choosing several, till he had about eight in his hand. He then took them to the *majzub* and graciously and with great ceremony placed them before him. The *majzub* picked up each empty tobacco tin and stared at it in utter bewilderment. It was as though he was gazing at the most precious gem in the world. He turned the tobacco tins over and over in his hands, staring and laughing with the pure joy of an innocent child. He was lost in wonderment, divinely intoxicated and absorbed in the Beloved.

Maqbool Saheb, Mehmood, the group and myself squeezed together into the confined space directly in front of the *majzub*. It was amazing. They sang a Punjabi song by Khwaja Ghulam Farid called Nagri Wasey Shalla. The word *mahi*, meaning beloved, is repeated throughout the song. Ali Mahi was delighted. He giggled. He stared at each of us through the widest eyes. He clapped his hands in glee. Maqbool Saheb and Mehmood sang with full strength and fervour, emphasising the *mahi*, doing all they could to bring pleasure to the *majzub*. But Mehmood was careful to keep that big silver bracelet well concealed! *Nazrana* was circled above the head of Ali Mahi, fluttering and falling upon the *qawwals*. There was immense energy in the crowded room. Several women started dancing. More *nazrana* was thrown over the *majzub* and the Sabris.

When the *qawwali* was over Ali Mahi returned to his tobacco tins and we departed from his presence to sit in the open air again. The scrapping sound grew louder and louder and then Ali Mahi's laugh could be heard. Mehmood undid his buttons and rolled up his sleeves. His jewellery was safe. But one of the group members had lost his sequinned Sindhi *topi*, a cap. It had caught Ali Mahi's eye and he had taken it for his own pleasure to stare at in wonderment. We walked back to the *tongas* and returned to Pakpattan Sharif.

The following year Mehmood and I rode out there again. But Ali Mahi had passed away months earlier. His *Mazar* now stands where his home and tobacco tins used to be.

9

Contemplations of a Traveller

First Summer

My first summer in Karachi! I have found yet another floor on which to live my nomadic existence, the top floor of a once grand now dilapidated house, an old Hindu house, in one of Karachi's older societies. Pigeons have taken up residence in the shambles that was once the kitchen. Now it is totally unusable. Rubble and debris from the broken ceilings lie in heaps throughout the abandoned rooms. Tiny birds dart in and out of the open windows. Lizards scurry up the walls. Dust drifts in on every waft of hot air settling in a mat of brown over the magnificent tiled floors. Only these tiles have retained their former elegance and dignity. All else is ruin and devastation.

At least I can be alone in this place. Everywhere else I have been bothered by the necessity to engage in conversation, my duty as a guest and a courtesy that I cannot fail to observe. I roll out some blankets on the hard tiles, under the ceiling fan. Thank Allah for that comfort at least. Suitcases in one corner and all necessities close at hand.

Unable to suppress or deny my innate sense of the aesthetic, I personalise my space, hanging on the front wall a gift from Mehmood, a green and gold *chador* from the *Mazar* of Data Saheb, placing a brass vase from Multan in a picturesque niche, dangling several *tasbihs* from a nail above my bedroll. These upstairs rooms would make a perfect home if they were renovated. Peace. Seclusion. Outside the window the branches of a tall neem tree form an intricate screen to filter the dazzling light of the midsummer's sun. But what a restoration job it would be! Perhaps this old home, with its garden full of tall trees and rare plants, is doomed to eventual demolition to make way for some hideous new mansion of the worst design.

My spirits are high during the first days. Enthusiastically I sweep and scrub the tiled floor every morning. Wash my clothes in the

inadequate cement bathroom. Valiantly try to keep the ever-present dust at bay. I am a regular little householder. The glorious *azan* from the nearby mosque on Jamshed Road floats through my window five times each day bringing with it an unfathomable peace and sense of eternity. My prayers fill time and space, my *zikr* becoming perpetual.

Yet, how quickly the physical can disrupt and dislocate the spiritual! The first sign was a small red spot on my cheek. Within days big blisters had appeared on my arms and neck and legs. Angry blisters that when burst simply kept spreading their infection to other parts. I consulted one *hakim*. His brews and potions alleviated nothing but the weight of my wallet. I consulted a second who assured me that within a week or so it would clear up. And in my ignorance and innocence I believed him whilst passing across another and yet another five hundred rupees note.

The humidity grew more intolerable. The dust blew in on waves of stifling heat. Cloth against skin was unbearable. The blisters grew bigger and continued to burst. Cleansing teas, thorough bathing, pills and ointments, nothing helped.

So I lay, day in and day out, under the ceiling fan, in the privacy of my own prison. How I welcomed the flaming fire of sunset with the *azan*, now sad and melancholy, heralding the approach of somewhat cooler hours! Endlessly the fan beat its rhythm above me, forcing the tears that filled my eyes to roll in streams down my pallid cheeks.

Slowly we advanced into the sauna of summer. Alone in a foreign land, my companion being far distant for a time, I felt utterly sorry for myself. Well, you wanted to be alone. So, why are you crying? Alone indeed!

But, the spiritual has such power that it can subdue the physical, if the will to do so is present. Nothing happens for nothing! Patience. The profound word emerged in all its mystery. Patience. *Sabr*. From the whirr of the fan, from the cracks in the walls and the falling plaster came patience. On the heat haze and in the patterns of scattered clouds passing my cell window was written 'patience'. From the itching of blisters and rolling beads of sweat the necessity for patience. This too will pass.

I turned in totality to *zikr*, with the *tasbih* passing through my fingers, the divine words moving on my lips, the reverberations reaching into my heart.

A Sufi Master was once asked, 'What does Allah want from His creation?' He answered, 'The condition they are now in!'

Patience and *zikr*, yes. But still no improvement in the infection that I feared would leave me scarred. Eventually I was released from my upstairs prison, rescued by the loving kindness and sisterhood of the *hakim*'s young wife, who took me into her home and nursed me back to health with the aid of good old western antibiotics, the first I had ever taken in my entire life.

Hidden under her own prison of *burqa* and veils she revealed herself as a vivacious and wonderful human being. We shared many hours of secret laughter in the darkness of her small apartment during the heat of the day when the streets outside became deserted ovens in which only mad boys roamed.

* * * *

Lovers Lose Their Way in Love and Become Entangled

On separation from, and union with, the Beloved. The dreadful abysses of contraction. The sublime peaks of expansion. The story of the lover's existence.

The words of a beautiful Sabri *qawwali* are addressed to the Beloved:

> Now that you have come so far, don't insist on going back.
> Now that you are going back, promise you will come again!

This is the painful truth of the lover's situation. The bliss of union is utterly filled with the pain of expectation of the next separation, which is bound to come, sooner or later. Here, in the realm of duality, the realm of opposites, it is inevitable that expansion is followed by contraction followed by expansion followed by contraction followed by expansion. The beloved comes. The beloved goes. The beloved returns then leaves again. *Lovers lose their way in love and become entangled.* The theme of all Sufi poetry overflows with this truth. The bliss of union is always tinged with the ache of foreboding: 'Soon this will end!' Yet, a ray of light always shines into the darkness of the despair of separation: 'This too will end!'

I can't explain the goings,
or the comings. You enter suddenly,
And I am nowhere again.
Inside the Majesty.

– Mevlana Rumi in *Like This*

How great was the great lover 'Iraqi! He learned how to thrive on separation, finding it even more blissful than union: *I want Union with Him. He wants separation from me—So I abandon my desire To His.*

I call on the Sufi Saints, 'Light the lamp of Love in the darkness of my heart. Ya Khwaja Saheb! Ya Baba Saheb! Ya Nizamuddin!'

Why am I so sad, O! Rasulullah?
Why am I so sad?
When I saw you in a dream we walked in a garden,
So, why am I so sad here in *dunya*?

'But when nights are serene, trouble follows!' said one Sufi Master. And, when the nights are troubled, serenity follows, for sure. There's no escaping it.

Surely each of us creates his own world. The power of the human heart is without measure. It projects its contents, be they luminous or turbid, onto the screen of our existence. The outside world reflects our inner world. How often I have realised this!

One glimpse of the Beloved, or a glance from him and the most dismal scene is instantaneously transformed into a place of effulgent beauty. But, when the Beloved has departed and the heart is filled with despair and hopelessness, the most gorgeous garden becomes a prison in which one is shackled and bound.

This dusty lane with scattered rubbish and dirty puddles sends my spirit soaring when the Beloved's face appears at the corner. But I drag my feet, tripping on pebbles, irritated and annoyed by bits of debris whenever he is distant and does not come.

When I see Your Face, the stones start spinning!
You appear; all studying wanders,
I lose my place.

– Mevlana Rumi in *Like This*

* * * *

The Sweet Surrender

The Surrender. Letting go. Real Islam. Total and unconditional surrender to the Will of Allah. The ocean of 'Ishq. Clinging to you amidst the rough waves of this world. Trying to direct. Wanting. Having an ideal. A goal. Yes! We both have the same ideal. We both have the same goal, the other shore across the infinite ocean of 'Ishq. But, I have been clinging to you with my will. I have not surrendered to the Will of Allah. Struggling to stay afloat, to move forward through the turbulent waters of *dunya*. But my clinging is holding me back. And it is surely holding you back too. We keep treading water with the goal up ahead. This is my limited will, not the Limitless Will of Allah. 'Let go!' cries the heart. 'Relax! Surrender! Stop clinging to your notion of how you will reach. You simply don't know! Leave everything to Allah. Release your clinging grasp. Learn to float freely, allowing the waves to gently carry you from the waters of *dunya* into the ocean of *'Ishq*.'

'Bullhe, what can you hope to find when love is totally blind?' And, as I release my desperate grasping, the Hand of Allah takes us by our hands and brings us to our yearned for goal. No struggling. No self will. Surrendering totally and unconditionally to the Will of Allah. And ... together, side-by-side, we arrive.

* * * *

Solitary Traveller on the Mystic Path: The Experience

As the train travelled through the desert of Sindh, between Hyderabad and Karachi, I stood at the door, deep in contemplation, gazing blankly at the passing arid landscape. Looking but not seeing. Train journeys are so sad when they bring one back to Karachi! Journeying away from Karachi is an adventure, filled with the unknown. But the journey back again is always tinged with the disenchantment of returning to the familiar, plus a streak of melancholy at the approaching separation from my companion. The landscape of Sindh is dry, yet somehow it invites me. My mind instantly transports me back into the past, to another journey with another companion through another desert in another land. It was a bus journey through the Sahara Desert in Algeria, where I discovered Islam firmly imbedded within my heart. I still

remember that sliver of silver crescent moon hanging close to the horizon as we descended further south into the wilderness. Solitary traveller. Have I always been a solitary traveller? Will I always be one? Life is a lonely journey of return to our origin in Allah. I recalled some words from an old Joni Mitchell song.

> We're just particles of change circling around the sun.
> How can I hold this point of view when I'm always tied and bound to someone?
> No one's ever going to show me everything.
> We all come and go unknown.

Pervaded by intense loneliness and longing, wanting to surrender completely and love unconditionally, I realised the extent of my expectations and attachments. Terrible enemies. Living in a state of expectancy—always missing out on the immediate experience of now. Not the last moment, the one that has just passed. Not the next moment, the one that is to come. This moment. Complete surrender. Unconditional love. Give everything. Become nothing. Find Allah now because this moment is Allah. The loneliness is Allah. The longing is Allah. The train. The desert. The companion. There is nothing more manifest than Allah, and nothing more hidden.

* * * *

Thoughts on a Train Moving South

To have travelled on the Path for many years, the depths of hopelessness and the peaks of pure joy! But, still trapped. Still suffocated by *dunya*. These trials. Is there ever any escape for the traveller, or is this the freedom I am seeking? The freedom of knowing, with utmost certainty, that I can do nothing.

> Freedom and love
> will never mesh—
> so I've become a slave
> and renounced my desire.

What a lover was Fakhruddin 'Iraqi! Why do we keep trying to direct our own lives? Such a mistake! Such ignorance! To think that we know what is best for us!! Madness and blindness to think we know what is

best. Surrender. Now. How? Wanting to surrender, but still the hooks of expectation are there in the heart. The hooks of *nafs*. Only the Saints, the Fakhruddin 'Iraqis, the pure ones are free from these hooks. So now what? The only company I want is that of the beloved. He has become my link with Allah. Shaykh al-Akbar, Muhyi-ud-Din Ibn al-'Arabi would say I am wrong. I am limiting Allah because my focus is on one of His manifestations, when He is manifest in every single speck of dust. But Mevlana Jalaluddin would say I am right. See Him through him. The beloved has become my clear locus of manifestation of Allah and my focus is on him. Ya Shams Tabrizi! Everything should intoxicate me, but only you do!

'Shams, help me now, being in the middle of being partly in my self, and partly outside.'

* * * *

Contemplation

Here within the labyrinth of dusty lanes and shadowy passageways I seem to be always in touch with humanity, acutely aware of the transitory nature of earthly existence. Life and death are ever present in this traditional colony. The mosque is just behind our home. At the time of prayer, the music of the *azan* floats through the air, dripping down the alleyways and enters the windows. The otherworldly voice of the *muezzin* draws out the beautiful yet majestic phrases—

> Allah is Great...I bear witness that there is no god but Allah...I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah...Come to prayer...Come to salvation...Allah is Great...There is no god but Allah.

From the bustle of the narrow main street with its spluttering rickshaws and incessant noise, fruit and vegetable vendors, boisterous school children and veiled women, I enter the quieter side streets. Returning home with the day's provisions in hand. The gravel crunches under my shoes. The sounds of the *bazaar* recede and fade behind me. Turning the corner I encounter a group of silent men, walking in procession, on their shoulders a shrouded body in a roughly made wooden stretcher. The living carrying a departed soul! A sobering image. One is shaken to the core! Today I was invited to the sixth birthday party of a little boy and today a friend passed away in his seventieth year.

* * * *

The Garden

Maghreb prayer. Pervaded by the most intense sadness and longing and loneliness. A watery image of myself in a luxuriant garden of wild growth. I am cared for and protected by someone who loves me infinitely. Warm sunlight, sweet fragrances and a reassuring hand placed ever so tenderly on my shoulder. *That* is *Tasawwuf*. The garden of the heart.

* * * *

A Lazy Afternoon

Friday afternoon. In the lanes and alleyways the muffled footsteps of men returning from their noon prayers. Sandals and boots gently crushing gravel and earth. I lie on the bed, thoughts faraway, *tasbih* inactive in my hand. There are many beggars on the streets at this time, knocking on doors, waiting for money or food. Some enchant with their drums and pipes, enticing us with the raw sounds of their music, others, aggressive and arrogant, demand alms. In the darkness of my room I wander along strange avenues of thought, these distant sounds of human beings drifting in and out of consciousness.

The incessant drone of one lone voice enters my window, passes through the stillness to my place of afternoon reverie. His plaintive Urdu words, spilling out, do not immediately register in my mind. I've heard his voice so many times before. I am too relaxed, too lost on the waves of my thoughts, to even stir. Shame on me!

He is calling the Supreme Name, 'In Allah's Name!' He cries over and over again. 'In Allah's Name!'

Surfacing from wherever I have been, my heart suddenly comprehends the words of this solitary beggar! I quickly jump up and wrap a *chadar* around my shoulders. As I grab my moneybag and rush to the door the voice fades. Alas! I glance up and down the alleyway. There he is! Going! Turning the corner. Gone! He became impatient, gave up and moved on. 'Ahh, what a pity!'

Inside my room again, I stand on the cool marble floor, shaking my head in wonderment at the ways in which Allah sends His Messages to us. 'Ya Allah! We must sit with the utmost respect, ever hopeful,

knocking on Your Door. But ... we must be patient. We have to wait patiently! No matter how long it takes. We must not move away!'

Shaykh Abdul Qadir al-Jilani said:

He bestows bounty and only He can restore crushed hopes.
Have faith, do not lose hope, wait patiently.
He indeed will create a way to deliver you from your hardships.

* * * *

The Promise

Yesterday, last night
an expanded heart at the
thought of your return.

Today, now,
sorrow and tears with the news
that your visit will be brief.

Pale sunlight on the wall.
Incense smoke gracefully rising.
My heart is burned out through
longing for you.

A day that started in
madness and tears
slowly dissolves into stillness
as I accept the waiting and the
promise of your return.

* * * *

Love

'O Allah! Why did You give the human heart the capacity for so much Love and then make Love too painful to bear?' When she uttered the words, 'O my beloved!' a secret voice said, 'Are you not yet prepared to give up your attachment to the feeling of love?'

Roar, lion of the heart,
and tear me open!

10

India: 'Light the Lamp of Love in the Darkness of My Heart!'

We were in a rickshaw on our way to the *Mazar* of 'Abdullah Shah Ghazi when Mehmood very casually said, 'Take us to India Amatullah. Take us all to the *Urs* in Ajmer Sharif!'

I was astounded. 'How can I take all of you to India?'

'You can do it! I am sure you can. Amatullah you must take the Sabri Brothers to India! Be our promoter and take us to Ajmer Sharif.'

And so Allah's Plan started to manifest.

Ajmer Sharif. Back in 1995 I had written my urgent letter to the authorities in Ajmer Sharif seeking the whereabouts of Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri. And here I was in 1999 spluttering through the streets of Karachi in a rickshaw with one of the Sabri Brothers, planning a visit to that very same sacred centre in India! Destiny.

The thought of promoting the Sabri Brothers had never before entered my mind. Yet, in a way I had been promoting them from those very first moment years earlier when I had seen them on the video recording. Discussing their beautiful art of *qawwali* whenever I spoke with friends or was introduced to new people. On those few occasions when interviewed by newspaper journalists, I inevitably described the powerful effect of Sabri Brothers' music and voices. At every available opportunity I was unknowingly and unintentionally promoting them. I simply loved their music and wished to share the experience, trying to open others' eyes and hearts to the spirituality of these divinely inspired *qawwals*.

So, as the Sabri Brothers' 'promoter' I began making arrangements in a random and somewhat haphazard fashion, not really knowing what I was doing. Feeling my way so to speak, but always with Mehmood's advice and assistance, never alone.

Visas. That was the highest priority. What chance did we have of obtaining visas for India? As a British Passport holder I had no problem but perhaps we would encounter obstacles with the group. But, as was stated earlier, if a Saint calls you to his *Mazar* then the doors will be opened, the barriers will be removed and the way will be made clear for your journey. Khwaja Mu'inuddin Chishti was certainly calling us to Ajmer Sharif.

One evening, quite spontaneously, Mehmood decided to take me to meet an old acquaintance, a lady from the Bhopal Royal Family. Over tea and sandwiches we talked about my books and the inspiration I received from Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri and the Sabri Brothers. She too was a great admirer of these *qawwals*. We discussed *Tasawwuf* and the Sufi saints. She too was a devotee of the Saints. And, she also was spiritually connected to the *Mazar* of Nizamuddin Awliya in Delhi. The *Sajjada Nashin* was her *Murshid*. Mehmood happened to mention our yearning to go to the *Urs* in Ajmer Sharif. Our gracious hostess, a lady with worldly connections too, offered her assistance in any possible manner. We eagerly accepted and within a few days were on the train to Islamabad to apply for the precious visas. After several days of waiting outside the Indian High Commission, a normal procedure as I was later to learn, we obtained the treasured stamps in our Passports without undue difficulty, thanks to the gracious lady from the Bhopal Royal Family. She had assured Mehmood and me that her *Murshid* would be of great assistance to us in the fulfilment of any yearnings and hopes in India. Khwaja Saheb was calling us. We were on our way to him!

* * * *

As I write these words I have just remembered something quite significant. From 1991 onwards, once every year, a letter containing a small pamphlet from India would reach my post office box in Australia. Faded near-illegible print on very thin recycled coloured paper. I was always perplexed by this pamphlet, an invitation to the *Urs* Celebrations of Khwaja Gharib Nawaz Mu'inuddin Chishti in Ajmer Sharif, India. I knew nothing about *Urs* Celebrations but somehow I vaguely recalled having heard or read the name Ajmer, somewhere. Yet, how amazing it is! Khwaja Saheb was calling me for many many years, even when I did not know who he was! The Chishti thread!

* * * *

The Indian experience! How to convey the impact on a western Muslim woman travelling with a troupe of ten Pakistani *qawwals* and musicians! The chaos of Attari Railway Station at the Pak-India border. The moments of spiritual bliss at the *Mazars* of the Saints. The dark despair of desolation in the deserted streets of Delhi. The sighs of intense yearning during the *Shab-e Ba'arat*, the Night of Destiny, spend in isolation on a rooftop under the star filled sky in the countryside outside Mumbai. Memorable India.

Over the years, Sabri Brothers have made many journeys into India by plane. This however was their first train journey and mine too. The train journey from Lahore to Delhi is total chaos and it is also utterly hilarious. A sense of humour is essential because without a sense of the absurd and ridiculous, without the ability to laugh at the situation one finds oneself in, the journey would be horrific. Thank heavens for my Australian sense of humour and sense of adventure. The border crossing is a spectacle. As the train pulls into the first station on the Pakistani side of the border, men and women jump off the vehicle while it is still moving. Some of them fall and quickly scramble to their feet to join in the battle for the antique, squeaky, heavy luggage trolleys. Then it is a fight for dear life to retain the prized trolley, whilst other family members hurl bags and cases, bundles and boxes through the train doors and windows onto the platform, caring little whether anyone is hit and injured in the process. Manners and courtesy are non-existent. Screaming women and children, angry and abusive men, try to push their mountains of baggage through the one and only door leading into the large Passport Control hall. Then, the long hot wait in queues, with dozens of ceiling fans buzzing overhead.

Thankfully the Sabris and I are reasonably calm and composed with only one of the *qawwals* having a lens punched out of his glasses whilst another limps on his badly squashed foot! I later developed huge purple bruises on my legs after being thoroughly shoved and jostled by an oversized Pakistani woman. The scene is so bizarre that I am unable to suppress my laughter. I feel like an actor in a Jacques Tati movie! But we are lucky. All of the Passport Officers are so excited to see the Sabri Brothers accompanied by the white lady with the British passport. We are ushered through the crowds to the front where our passports are stamped without any delay. We sip from glasses of cool water. More and more travellers spill through the tiny door into the vast hall. Hundreds of faces are facing us, hundreds of eyes staring at the great *qawwals*. Then we crush our way through more small doors to the

Customs Hall where we are once again shown the greatest respect. With the minimum of formality we pass through to the platform itself, find some empty seats on the train and then take up the long, long wait for several hours whilst those hundreds of other travellers are processed and searched and questioned.

After copious cups of tea and many walks along the platform and hours of waiting and dozing, the train is ready to depart, packed full of baggage and travellers. The train literally crawls along the track between Pakistan and India for a very short distance, perhaps only a kilometre or two. A dashing Sikh soldier dressed in a crisp khaki uniform and turban, gallops on horseback alongside the train, escorting us into India past the high barbed wire barrier that stretches into the distance marking the end of Pakistan and the beginning of India.

The Sabris come from India, all having been born there except Mehmood, the only one of the family to be born in Pakistan. This is an important and nostalgic journey for them and an honour for me, from faraway Australia, to be with them. Destiny. A dream-come-true, to be sure!

We now must wait a further ten, twelve, fifteen hours to be 'processed'. Here it becomes my responsibility to fill out each and every immigration form for each and every member of the group. I don't know how it became my duty but somehow I slip comfortably and effortlessly into my new role. I go to and fro along the station getting *chai* for Sabri Saheb or changing Pakistani currency into Indian or buying food for the *qawwals*. I soon realise that I have a real job to do! I am not merely going along for the ride so to speak. I am actually taking care of the Sabri Brothers!

Throughout the Attari Station ordeal of our three train journeys to India in 1999, 2000 and 2001, I have noticed that Haji Maqbool Ahmed Sabri remains utterly calm and composed. He is patient when all around him are in frenzied agitation. He simply sits on a seat, his prayer beads moving gently through his fingers, his lips uttering the remembrance of Allah. Nothing hassles him. Mehmood, the group members and I make sure his every need is fulfilled. Many people come to him wanting to shake his hand and give salaams. He simply smiles back serenely, his lips still busy with the *zikrullah*. And when he is not reciting his *zikr* he is lost in his music. He is somewhere else—immersed in the notes as new compositions come to life.

I am somewhat of an oddity on this station—white lady, obviously Muslim, travelling with a group of Pakistani musicians. The Sikh

guards and customs officials are curious and often stop me to look at my British Passport and ask many questions, perplexity written all over their faces. What is she, an Australian with a British Passport, doing with those Pakistani *qawwals*?

Eventually we get onto the train that will take us to Delhi. It is night when the train finally pulls out of the station after our fifteen-hour wait. We will arrive in Delhi before dawn.

* * * *

As the darkness of the night sky softens into the tender soft pink of dawn we load our baggage onto the horsedrawn carts at the end of the Delhi railway platform. But before climbing up into our seats on the carts we sit around on wooden benches drinking steaming hot sweet Indian *chai*. We are all tired and grubby after the journey but still excited. I look around at the scene. I am in Delhi. Unbelievable! And I am with the Sabri Brothers. Amazing. And we are now going to the *Mazar* of Nizamuddin Awliya. Incredible!

* * * *

Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya is known as the Beloved of Allah, *Mehboob Ilahi*, and the King of Shaykhs, *Sultan al-Masha'ikh*. Hazrat was born in Badaon near Delhi around the year 636 AH (AD 1243) and was named Muhammad. When he was five years old his father passed away. His mother Bibi Zulaika, a woman of great piety, inculcated in her only son a deep and abiding love for religious devotion and a spirit of resignation and contentment. The family lived in abject poverty but it was his mother's spiritual strength that enabled them to accept the hardships without complaint. When there wasn't any food to eat she would say, 'Nizamuddin, today we are the guests of Allah', a remark from which the young Nizamuddin gained immense spiritual solace. Often she would say, 'You will be a man of destiny one day.'

From Badaon the family moved to Delhi where Nizamuddin devoted himself to his studies. He was training to become a *qazi*. But before leaving Badaon, when Nizamuddin was only twelve years old, he heard for the first time the name Baba Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakar spoken by a visiting *qawwal*. The seed was planted in his heart and he developed a great love for the Saint in Ajodhan (Pakpattan Sharif). After every prayer Nizamuddin would utter, ten times, the name of his future *Pir-*

O-Murshid. With the passing of time the seed blossomed and his desire to become a *qazi* diminished and faded. His heart and head were turned towards Baba Farid in Ajodhan (Pakpattan Sharif). He was twenty years old when he reached the humble hut of Baba Farid. The Saint who was then in his late eighties, initiated Nizamuddin into the Chishti Silsila. During the next three years Nizamuddin visited his *Pir-O-Murshid* three times, each visit extending for several months. His spiritual training was completed in these three visits. At this point he was undecided whether he should continue his formal studies or turn himself in totality to the spiritual path. Baba Farid advised him to undertake the two, formal and spiritual, until one 'gets an upper hand over the other.'

In 664 AH (AD 1265) when bestowing *khilafat* on Nizamuddin, Baba Farid said, 'You will be a tree under whose soothing shadow people will find comfort.' And so it was. And so it still is. Nizamuddin was hesitant, not wanting to shoulder such an immense responsibility. Baba Farid declared, 'Nizam! Take it from me; though I do not know if I will be honoured before the Almighty or not, I promise not to enter paradise without your disciples in my company.'

Nizamuddin left for Delhi never to see his beloved *Pir-O-Murshid* again. Baba Farid passed away very soon afterwards. It has been written that when Baba Farid's tomb was being constructed, Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya arranged for one entire Qur'an to be recited over each brick.

Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya was twenty-three years of age when he was appointed the successor of Baba Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakar and became Head of the Chishti *Silsila*. Throughout his sixty years as spiritual leader he was a living 'tree under whose soothing shadow' countless homeless, destitute and broken people and also kings, soldiers, statesman and noblemen found rest. And today, nearly seven hundred years after his passing away, his blessed shade still gives ease and delight to the multitudes of devotees who come to him from all corners of the world. During his lifetime, Hazrat Nizamuddin spread the Chishti message of love and service far and wide through India, more than any other Chishti Master before or after him.

Whenever Nizamuddin Awliya is mentioned, the name of Amir Khusrau seems to reverberate and echo nearby. Amir Khusrau was the most beloved of all his *murids*. Amir Khusrau, born in Delhi of Turkish origin, met Nizamuddin Awliya at a very young age when they resided in the same area of Delhi. The story of his first *bai'at*, oath of

allegiance, with Nizamuddin Awliya, is a beautiful one. His father wanted him to become a *murid* but the young Amir Khusrau declined, saying that he could not be a *murid* without having the pure intention to be one. So, when the father and elder brother went inside the room for their *bai'at*, Amir Khusrau waited outside. He composed a verse in his mind and thought, 'If Hazrat is a true man of spiritual insight he will know about my verse and he will answer it. In which case I will become his *murid*.' Almost immediately a servant came to him and recited Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya's answer, also in verse. Amir Khusrau has been quoted as saying that he became like a crazy man and rushed inside, fell at Hazrat's feet and became his *murid*. He renewed his *bai'at* regularly throughout his life.

Sama' played an integral part in the life of Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya at his *khanqah*. Often he would go into ecstasy when hearing the *qawwals* singing mystic songs and tears would flow endlessly from his eyes. He would wipe his tears with small pieces of cloth and then throw these torn pieces before the *qawwals*. Such was his immersion in the *qawwal's* message of Divine Love. Amir Khusrau was a musical genius as well as the most gifted poet of his age. Not only is he credited with inventing new techniques in composition and music but, some say, he also invented the sitar. *Qawwals* to this day consider Amir Khusrau to be the father of their art. Hazrat Nizamuddin and his beloved Amir Khusrau shared a great passion for music. All the *qawwals* of the city used to flock to the *khanqah*. Hazrat was such a connoisseur of music that under his guidance the *qawwals* raised music to the height of a sublime art, to the level of a spiritual discipline.

Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya passed away on 18 Rabi ul-Awwal 725 AH (AD 1325). In accordance with Hazrat's wishes his bier was preceded by *qawwals* singing a couplet of Shaykh Saadi. As fate would have it Amir Khusrau was absent from Delhi at the time. So overwhelmed with grief was he when he finally reached the grave of his beloved *Pir-O-Murshid* that he blackened his face with earth, tore his clothes and fell in a swoon whilst reciting: 'The fair one lies on the couch with her black tresses scattered on her face; O Khusrau, come home now, for night has fallen all over the world.' Within six months he too passed away and his *Mazar* is at the foot of the one whom he loved so much, his *Pir-O-Murshid*, Hazrat Nizamuddin.

* * * *

There is spiritual beauty emanating from the *Mazars* of the Awliya'Allah, an ineffable beauty that penetrates and fills the surrounding atmosphere and illuminates the hearts of the devotees. Even when the *Mazar* itself is completely devoid of architectural beauty it is the inward beauty of the Saint who rests within which is transmitted to all his lovers and guests, to the air above and to the earth beneath. If however the *Mazar* is architecturally beautiful, as with that of Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya, this combination of outward beauty of the *Mazar* and inward beauty of the Saint is inexpressibly sweet.

As predicted by his *Pir-O-Murshid*, Baba Fariduddin, Hazrat Nizamuddin became that immense shady tree under which humanity would find ease and protection, a haven, a sanctuary and a realm of peace. Till this day Hazrat Nizamuddin continues to shower love upon his visitors. His kitchen is open to every hungry person and his heart is open to give nourishment to innumerable thirsty souls.

Each Saint has his own spiritual fragrance. Each Mazar is different from every other *Mazar*. An elusive sweetness, tinged with the slightest hint of heart-melting poignancy, engulfs me at the *Mazar* of Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya. I may feel at home in the *Darbar* of Baba Fariduddin in Pakpattan Sharif, but in this *Darbar* of Nizamuddin Awliya, *Mehboob Ilahi*, something indescribably and unbearably tender overwhelms the heart.

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A Botswanan Reverie: Hazrat Nizamuddin and Amir Khusrau

Irshad was high on Love Itself. "*'Ishq!*" he exclaimed. 'Ecstatic Love!' We were gathered around the glowing embers of a fire in a garden in Botswana. Khalid had invited us to his home for spiritual companionship and to share a meal. As our bodies were warmed by the heat radiating from the fire, the flames of love in our hearts were being fanned into a blaze by the passion of Irshad's words.

"*'Ishq!*"

And the vastness of a night sky filled with myriads of stars covered and protected us in it's velvety embrace.

Whenever I was with Irshad, somehow our conversations always arrived at this point. No matter from where we started on the dry shore we would always end up swimming in the ocean of *'ishq*, the *'ishq* of

Amir Khusrau for his Beloved *Pir-O-Murshid* Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya.

In his poetry, this intoxicated *murid* captured and expressed the ecstatic heights of his love then transformed them into *raags* of overpowering beauty. And eight hundred years later, lovers still reel in rapture when the *qawwal* utters these phrases of passion. The first *qawwali* I ever experienced was by Amir Khusrau. *'You have given me the nectar of love to drink and you made me drunk the moment my eyes met yours!'* He is incomparable, the father of *qawwali*, the king of *'ishq*.

As we stared into the carmine embers, each of us lost in his or her own private *'ishq*, someone asked Irshad, 'If Amir Khusrau loved Hazrat Nizamuddin so passionately and he loved Amir Khusrau so much why didn't he make him his *khalifa*?'

Irshad's eyes were covered with the mist of longing as his words erupted in a shower of passion. 'How could Nizamuddin make him his *khalifa*? No wonder he didn't make Amir Khusrau his *khalifa*! Can you imagine, what sort of a *tariqa* it would be! The Khusrau *tariqa*. *Subhanallah*! The intensity of *'ishq* would have burned up everything. The world would have gone mad with love! Hazrat Nizamuddin knew this. He didn't, he couldn't make him his *khalifa*. A *tariqa* mad with love! Mad ... with love!'

Hazrat Nizamuddin used to pray: 'Forgive me my Lord for the sake of the burning passion of love of Khusrau's heart.'

Sitting by a fire in Botswana. But in my mind and heart I am once again in Delhi sitting at the feet of Nizamuddin, right at his door. As close as any woman is permitted to go to the Saint here in the physical realm. Fingers interlacing, forehead touching the cool marble filigree. Tears flowing. Heart connected. Behind me, buried at the feet of his Beloved, lies Hazrat Amir Khusrau. Shattered to pieces when his Nizamuddin passed away he followed soon after, to be reunited with his Beloved in the realm of spirits. *'Beholding your face I offer myself in sacrifice.'*

* * * *

The setting for *qawwali mehfils* at *Mazars* is always spiritually powerful. The *qawwals* sit facing the doors of the *Mazar* whilst the listeners gather along either side, leaving the space between the *qawwals* and the Saint open—a passage for communication and praise.

At the *Mazar* of Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya, the setting is both powerful and poignant. Not only is the Saint himself directly in front of the *qawwals* but Hazrat Amir Khusrau, the 'father of *qawwali*', is directly behind them. What a blessed spot! The *qawwals* and the devotees gathered for the *mehfil* occupy the energised space between the Saint and his favourite *murid*.

The ritual of making an offering, *nazrana*, during the *qawwali mehfil* is complex, its very foundation being the hierarchical structure of the Sufi *Silsila* itself. It has many social, economic and spiritual aspects but the money offering actually symbolises the devotee's act of stripping himself of everything in the sacrifice of love of the Beloved. In the past ecstatic devotees would spontaneously give their clothing and possessions. Today the divestment is usually in the form of money, though I have witnessed certain people who, under the influence of a spiritual state, have given watches and jewellery to the *qawwals*. The most moving offering I saw was a *dervish* symbolically taking his heart from his breast and placing it before the Sabris. Beautiful!

When a devotee is stirred by the *qawwali*, when his heart is moved or overcome with love or awe, he presents his offering to the Shaykh who presides over the *mehfil*. In the absence of a spiritual representative, the offering is symbolically presented to the Saint. This offering is then passed to the *qawwals*. The money has thus been blessed. The Sabri *mehfils* at the *Mazar* of Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya were always late into the night when very few devotees were gathered in the tranquil *Darbar*. On these occasions the doors of the *Mazar* were locked for the night and there were no spiritual heads present to preside over the *mehfils*. As each devotee rose to offer his *nazrana* he would first walk discreetly and respectfully to the steps of the *Mazar*. Gently he would touch the top step with his *nazrana*, a beautifully moving gesture of love and respect. He would then take his blessed offering to the Sabris, and pass it either directly in Maqbool Saheb or Mehmood's hand or place it on top of one of their harmoniums. *Nazrana* is blessed money and greatly respected by *qawwals* who consider it a gift from the Saint himself.

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Late into the night we assemble for a quiet, devotional *mehfil* in the *Darbar* of the Beloved of Allah, *Mehboob Ilahi*, Hazrat Nizamuddin. There are very few devotees scattered across the marble courtyard but

the sound of harmoniums, *dholak* and *tabla* enchant and entice them to gather in ceremonial manner around the *qawwals* from Pakistan. I sit white faced amidst the bronzed. Across the courtyard another pale faced one. Young Frenchman, lost in his rapture. Jerome. Now a Muslim named Qadir. Wearing a cloak of many colours. Head of blonde hair thrown back, glazed eyes staring in bewilderment into the star filled heavens. The whirling begins. Arms outstretched. His ecstasy. Was it pure ecstasy or was the ecstasy induced with the aid of hashish?

The *Mazar* of Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya is utterly intimate. Gently, ever so gently the Saint calls and invites his lovers to come close, and yet closer, and sit with him. I love this Mazar, delicate and exquisite, nestled close to the high red walls of the mosque. The luminous presence of Hazrat Nizamuddin renders everything enchanting!

Long years ago when living in Australia, before any thoughts of India or Pakistan, I saw a dream. In that dream I was called by a very special name. Someone in the dream called me 'the saintly lady of Delhi'!

But everyone, 'every one' who visits the courtyard of Mehboob Ilahi, everyone whose sandals touch the earth in the lanes outside or whose glance falls in the direction of the Noble *Mazar* or who catches a waft of the fragrance from his blessed presence, every one is coloured with a tint of his saintliness, so generous in Mehboob Ilahi.

'Aaj rang hai,' sang Hazrat Amir Khusrau, 'Today is the colour of my Beloved, Nizamuddin Awliya!'

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Near the Moin Guesthouse, on the roadside beneath our window, stood the *chai* trolley of an old man whom we named Kashmiri Baba. He was a poor man, like so many of those who flock to the *Darbar* of Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya, their tree of protection. Kashmiri Baba gave us the sweetest *chai*. He thought I was a rich lady from the West. So he asked for money, for his daughter he said, which I gave even though I think he probably spent it on hashish or something. He was a poor man yet he gave Mehmood a handful of semi-precious stones and to me he handed a beautiful pendant of malakite set in silver. *C'Èst le mystere!* It is a mystery! We never saw Kashmiri Baba after that first stay in *Basti* Nizamuddin. And we never missed him sorely and his sweet *chai* and wrinkled smile.

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Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya said,

'In truth, the one who is reliant upon Allah is the one who disposes of people's pain and suffering.'

'Of all the worships the one that most pleases Allah is to bring relief to the humble and oppressed.'

'A *dervish* is one who would never disappoint a needy one.'

* * * *

At last we are on the road to Ajmer Sharif in Rajasthan. With each passing kilometre the yearning becomes more intense, the awareness that we are approaching the Courtyard of the Greatest Saint in India. Agitation is felt in the solar plexus as waves of adrenalin sweep through the body. This, our first journey to Ajmer Sharif, is by van in the night. All we see of Jaipur, the pink city, is its lights as we swiftly drive through the streets. The journey is long and we are all crammed tightly into the van along with our baggage and musical instruments. The beams of headlights from oncoming vehicles illuminate our sleepy faces. It is a silent journey. No one speaks. Each one is either lost in thoughts of the destination or smoking silently or on the verge of a brief nap. Occasionally we take a rest stop at a roadside hotel for sweet *chai*. Then, back into the van and onwards to the Celebration.

The sun rises. An arid landscape surrounds us. We pass scattered huts and shelters with women in colourful saris swaying along the road, heavy silver bracelets and anklets shining against their dark skin. So different from Pakistan. Such vibrant colours here in Hindustan. We cover the remaining kilometres through densely clustered dwellings. Our van comes to a halt in one of the dusty roads at the foot of the hill upon which stands the *Darbar* of the *Sultan-ul-Hind*, Khwaja Mu'inuddin Chishti. Dazed after the night's journey yet exuberant, we scramble out of the hot van into the cool refreshing morning breeze. We have arrived in Ajmer Sharif.

Haji Maqbool Ahmed Sabri raises his hands in private supplication, his eyes moist with tears. This is the man who wrote *Khwaja Ki Diwani*. And these are the *qawwals* who have inspired countless people throughout the world with that song of devotion to Khwaja Mu'inuddin Chishti.

O Khwaja, I have come to your town like a beggar and all the people say I am possessed, obsessed and enchanted
Diwani, diwani, diwani, by you!
How can love be kept a secret?
Even if they stitch my lips together
This heart of mine will say ... diwani, diwani
Khwaja Ki Diwani.'

Together we stand in the streets of Khwaja's town. We are tired and grubby but we have reached our destination. Khwaja called us and we came.

* * * *

Khwaja Mu'inuddin Chishti was born around the year 536 AH (AD 1141) in the province of Sijistan in Persia. His parents were descendants of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and they named their son Muinuddin Hasan. He is now known as *Gharib Nawaz*, the Helper of the Poor, and *Sultan-ul-Hind*, the King of India. Many legends are told about Khwaja Gharib Nawaz and there are many miracles attributed to him, but little reliable historical information is available about this Great Saint who spread the Sufi message of Love and Peace throughout India.

Whilst in his teens he was orphaned but he was far from destitute having inherited land from his father. It is told how one day a *majzub* gave him a piece of oil cake that he had himself chewed. Through that piece of cake, mixed with the saliva of the *majzub*, a transmission of mystical knowledge took place. Khwaja Saheb now yearned for spiritual enlightenment and, after distributing his wealth, set off on his journey in the quest for knowledge. In Samarkand and Balkh he studied at the universities and met Sufis. He then travelled to Iraq where he was destined to meet his *Pir-O-Murshid*, the Chishti Saint, Khwaja Usman Harooni. For twenty years Khwaja Saheb served his master, travelling with him and carrying his belongings. Khwaja Usman Harooni was training and grooming his *murid*, Khwaja Saheb, and Khwaja Saheb was totally obedient to his *Murshid*. In Baghdad in the year 582 AH, when Khwaja Saheb's spiritual training was complete, Khwaja Usman Harooni blessed him, made him his *khalifa* and then bid him farewell. It was time for Khwaja Saheb, now in his mid-forties, to become a spiritual guide for others to travel on the path of heart

purification and enlightenment. Khwaja Saheb now set out alone on another journey.

The quest for knowledge has no end and even the greatest saints never cease seeking knowledge, no matter what heights of spirituality they have attained. The Holy Qur'an tells man to pray, 'Oh Allah, increase me in knowledge!'

Khwaja Saheb soon met the young man who was destined to become his successor. Accounts differ as to the place of this meeting. It was either in the city of Isfahan or Baghdad that he encountered the seventeen-year-old Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar. Seeing the signs of immense spirituality in the young man, Khwaja Saheb initiated him into the Chishtiyya *Silsila*.

Khwaja Saheb then went to Holy Mecca to perform his Haj. And it was in Madina that he received inspiration from the Holy Prophet, an inspiration that eventually guided him to the city of Ajmer in Rajasthan in India. Ajmer was the site from which his teachings and message of Universal love would spread throughout the entire Subcontinent. But before reaching Ajmer, he went to the *Mazar* of the great saint, Data Ganj Baksh Ali Hajweri in Lahore and secluded himself close to the Saint for a forty-day retreat, *chilla*, of intense meditation and *zikr*.

There are many stories told about Khwaja Saheb in Ajmer Sharif. Many miracles are attributed to him and mass conversions of Hindus. He was not welcomed in the city when he and his entourage arrived. But Khwaja Saheb was on a divinely inspired mission so nothing could deter him from fulfilling it. He decided to settle under a shady tree in the vicinity of the beautiful Anasagar Lake but the hostile Raja wanted him out of Ajmer. In an endeavour to force him and his *murids* to depart, the Raja prevented them from taking water from the lake. Khwaja Saheb ordered one of his *murids* to collect just one cupful of water from Anasagar and, it is told, as he filled the cup with water the entire contents of the lake dried up, along with all the wells and lakes in the vicinity and also the milk in the breasts of all nursing mothers.

Khwaja Saheb's message was and is one of universal love, therefore his love extended to everyone regardless of race, religion, caste or status. He respected all. As a true messenger of love, he bore no enmity towards anyone and many were the Hindus who, recognising the signs of sainthood in him, came to seek his blessings and spiritual guidance. Within the Chishti tradition it is said that when Khwaja Saheb observed the passion with which the Hindus sang their religious songs, using a variety of musical instruments, he sought divine permission, from the

Holy Prophet, to use music and verse for his mission. Divine permission was granted. Many Hindus embraced Islam, not through compulsion but through ... love. Khwaja Saheb also introduced into the *zikr* of his *murids* several breathing techniques, such as breath control, derived from yoga practices.

Khwaja Saheb believed that the best and highest manner of devotion to Allah was to relieve the misery of the distressed, to fulfil the needs of the helpless and to feed the hungry and his advice to all future generations of Chishtis is to have generosity like a river, affection like the sun and humility like the earth. Khwaja Saheb was in his nineties when he passed away from this earthly realm to be reunited with his Beloved. On the night of 5 Rajab 633 AH (AD 1236) Khwaja Saheb retired to his room for devotions, prayers and meditation. The following morning, 6 Rajab, it was discovered that he had died. Legend has it that the words, 'He is a beloved of Allah and he died in the love of Allah' were written upon his forehead. These words are now inscribed upon his tomb. Just prior to his passing away Khwaja Gharib Nawaz Mu'inuddin Chishti named his favourite *murid*, Hazrat Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki, as his successor. The Chishti *Silsila* has Hazrat Qutbuddin's name after that of Khwaja Saheb though some historical documents claim that Hazrat Qutbuddin predeceased his *Pir-O-Murshid* by several months. Nonetheless he was the spiritual successor of the *Sultan-ul-Hind* Khwaja Mu'inuddin Chishti.

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Prior to the journey from Delhi to Ajmer Sharif, the *sajjada nashin* at the *Mazar* of Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya had recommended that we put ourselves under the care of a certain family of *Khadims*. Carrying our luggage we climbed through the narrow lanes that wind their way up the hill towards the *Darbar*. Coming to a side alley we proceeded a short distance to find ourselves in front of an old building named Wali Manzil. We entered and were greeted by our *Khadims* who then made all arrangements for our stay in the Saint's city.

There are about 4000 *khadims*, men and women, in Ajmer Sharif. All are descendants of Hazrat Khwaja Saiyyed Fakhruddin Gardezi who was the personal servant and attendant of Khwaja Mu'inuddin Chishti. The word *khadim* comes from *khidmat* meaning 'service'. It is the responsibility of the *khadims* to be of service to the visitors and devotees at the shrine, to take care of their needs and ensure that their

stay is pleasant. And it is the duty of the *khadims* to look after the ceremonial rites and rituals of the Shrine.

Before making our first *ziyarat* to the *Mazar Sharif* we settle in our temporary home just near Wali Manzil. We bathe and don fresh clothes and apply *atr* in order to present ourselves at the Court of the King. Then, as each of us is ready, either singly or in twos and threes we make our way up the hill, along the alleyways to our destination, the *Darbar*.

On this special first visit, Mehmood and I climb the steep narrow lane winding our way amongst hundreds of people. Many men in the crowd immediately recognise Mehmood. They embrace him warmly and then invite us to drink *chai* with them or share a small snack. 'Later, later,' smiles Mehmood in reply, indicating that we are on our way to give salaams to Khwaja Saheb. Slipping off our sandals at the gates of the *Darbar* we silently approach the *Mazar*, stepping over sleeping children and old women, winding our way amongst the multitudes. Then, amazingly, we are there in front of the gilded doors of the *Mazar*. We had travelled so far from Karachi to present ourselves before Khwaja Saheb. We are filled with love and yearning.

The official guard at the doors is somewhat aggressive in his manner as he indicates that we should put money into the donation box. Surely Khwaja Saheb does not want compulsory gifts! I discreetly slip some currency notes through the slot on the top of the box. The guard brusquely rubs his wand of peacock feathers across the sacred doors of the *Mazar* and then hits our heads and backs with the iridescent green and blue plumes to transfer the blessing. With our concentration on the saint who rests in his *Mazar* we manage to find a way around this official without too much difficulty. All Kings have their bodyguards. We came for the King.

Huge colourful canvas canopies provide shade to the mass of devotees in the *Darbar*. Electric fans buzz on all the columns and from the decoratively painted ceilings of the many porches and arcades. But still the marble courtyard is burning hot as we step lightly and briskly to the next piece of shade. From the midst of one section of crowd come the sounds of harmonium and *dholak* and the voice of a *qawwal*. Mehmood smiles at me. 'Come!' He reaches into his pocket and withdraws a few currency notes. I reach into my bag and bring forth more notes. Then holding the offering, the *nazrana*, on our joined palms we weave through the people and bow low, placing the gift into the waiting hand of the old *qawwal*. He smiles at Mehmood. Maybe

he too has recognised this Sabri Brother. It is incredibly moving to witness the perfect courtesy that Mehmood Sabri shows towards all other *qawwals*.

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For ten days our home is the huge sunlit room on the top floor of the old building near Wali Manzil. *Chadars* and pillows are spread across the cool bare floor upon which we will eat and sleep. A heavy colourful patterned curtain is hung across one corner of the room thereby making a separate space for me, the only woman in the troupe. Word then goes out that after so many long years of absence, the Sabri Brothers have finally come to the *Urs* in Ajmer Sharif. From that time onwards, for the ten days of our stay, a flow of visitors climbs the stairs to our room to sit in the company of Haji Maqbool Ahmed Sabri and Mehmood, to talk with them, be inspired by them or simply to observe, in awe, the great Pakistani *qawwals*.

In our sunny room *mehfils* were discussed and arranged. Apart from the nightly *qawwali* at the *Mazar Sharif* there were many private ones for various Sufi shaykhs and their *murids*. Throughout our stay the Sabris usually sang at about four or five *mehfils* each night. As soon as one programme finished we would be off, walking through the intricate alleyways to their next *mehfil*. The two brothers were often hoarse when they awoke the following day, their throats dry and swollen. Yet by night they had recovered their strength and their voices. No *mehfil* was ever refused. This was Ajmer Sharif! This was Khwaja Saheb's *Urs*! Blessings were descending in abundance.

My experience of my first *Urs* in Ajmer Sharif was a *qawwali* experience. Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri had come to me in many dreams and in one dream he had told Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan that I was the lady who was going to write the book about him, so I wanted to taste as much as I could of what the Sabri Brothers tasted. Of course, I could never taste the intoxication that they experienced when sitting before and singing for the *Sultan-ul-Hind* Khwaja Gharib Nawaz. Though, I did savour some of the enchantment!

Many times Mehmood has related to me this beautifully moving story about an incident that occurred in Ajmer Sharif in 1977. And it surely is a powerful image. Mehmood had joined the group only two years prior to this miraculous event. This was when the Sabri Brothers were at the very height of their fame and popularity. Everyone in

Pakistan and India knew the Sabri Brothers, Haji Ghulam Farid and Haji Maqbool Sabri. Their names were household words.

On this particular night in 1977 all four Sabri Brothers were at the *mehfil* in the *Darbar*. They were sitting in the usual place facing the shining doors of the *Mazar* of Khwaja Gharib Nawaz. They were surrounded by thousands of devotees. I can imagine the crush of people, the fervour and love and joy and abandon. The vibrant colours, predominately green and orange, and the delicate all engulfing fragrance of rose.

The Sabri Brothers started to sing their stirring *qawwali* about Khwaja Saheb, a *qawwali* called *Savairey Savairey*, (*in the very early morn*), a *qawwali* that continues to stir and move audiences to ecstatic heights. On this night the mass of devoted followers became more ecstatic with each phrase and gesture of the *qawwals*. The energy within the *Darbar* was pulsating with devotion and yearning.

The impassioned cry of Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri, the artistry of Haji Maqbool's voice, the fervent repetitions of the chorus, the dynamic beats of the *dholak* and the rain of *nazrana* fluttering down upon the *qawwals*.

They were singing extremely powerful verses when the miraculous happening occurred.

Kisi gham zada nay jo Khwaja Piya ko tarap kar bulaya Savairey Savairey,
Khazana Muhammadka hathon mein layka wahein unko paya Savairey Savairey.

When a grief-stricken person tremulously called on Beloved Khwaja
in the morning, the very early morn.
In his hands he found the Treasury of Muhammad, in the morning, the very early morn.

Suddenly the heavy padlock on the *Mazar* snapped. The gleaming doors swung open revealing the grave of the Saint inside. There was no longer a physical barrier between Khwaja Gharib Nawaz and his devotees. The Sabri Brothers were now face to face with the Greatest Saint in India, the Founder of the Chishti *Silsila* in the Subcontinent. The audience gasped in amazement! The *qawwali* grew more intense. Devotees in the crowd exclaimed, 'Khwaja Saheb has given his ultimate blessings to Sabri Brothers!'

Savairey Savairey is extremely potent. I remember the first time I heard it back in 1995 when I was in the bushland paradise of Australia.

I was watching the Sabri Brothers on *The Magic of Sabri Brothers*, a video recording of a 1991 concert in Dubai. Suddenly I was overwhelmed by an immense inrush (*warid*) of *'ishq*. Next thing I realised was that I was no longer sitting in front of the video player. I was out in the bushland, standing on a fallen tree trunk, staring into the dense mass of undergrowth and I was sobbing and crying my heart out. This is the *hal*, spiritual state, or *wajd*, ecstasy that descends upon some devotees during the *qawwali*. My mind did not understand any of the poetry yet my heart knew it all! How did I get from the television to the fallen log? I was drowning in the ocean, burning in the fire of *'ishq*. Lost in the power of the *qawwali*. The magic of the Sabri Brothers! The spiritual rank of Khwaja Saheb! *Savairey Savairey* is a powerful *qawwali* indeed.

The Sabri Brothers have performed their *qawwali* in numerous prestigious venues throughout the world, Carnegie Hall, Royal Albert Hall, Sydney's Opera House, concert halls in St Petersburg and Moscow, the Royal Palace in Marrakesh. The Sabri Brothers have sung for worldly Kings and Queens, Princes, Ambassadors, Generals and Prime Ministers, for the wealthy and for the élite. They have been showered with honours and shown great respect from East to West, North to South.

Yet, with all this acclaim and admiration they have remained unassuming, simple and gentle traditional musicians. They have travelled around the globe spreading the message of Divine Love. Jetsetting *qawwals*! When rooms in a five star hotel are provided for them they happily accept. When a hard floor in a third rate guesthouse is to be their bed they are equally pleased. Their work is solely to create beautiful music to inspire and uplift the people.

No setting, no matter how illustrious, could ever compare with the Court of the Great Sufi Saint, Khwaja Mu'inuddin Chishti in Ajmer Sharif, Rajasthan. This is the centre, the source, the sacred site from where the *qawwals'* message of Divine Love originated.

* * * *

There's a thread running through this book, a beautiful Chishti thread. Weaving its way through the events and encounters, looping its loop and tying its bow around my heart!

* * * *

The Sultan of India, Khwaja Saheb, is King for everyone—Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs and Parsis. There are no barriers, no dividing lines or distinctions. And basically that is what the Sufi Message of Divine Love is all about. Love of Allah and love of His creation. Khwaja Saheb's supreme advice to those who tread the Sufi Path is to have affection like the sun, hospitality like a river and humility like the earth. Love all and hate none. This is the message of the Chishti *Silsila*. And unlike many *Mazars* where women are prohibited from entering, Khwaja Saheb's *Mazar* is open for all. In his lifetime everyone was welcome and after his passing away everyone is still welcome. This is the true spirit of the Chishtis!

The laying of *chadars* and scattering of flowers and perfume upon the *Mazars* of the Saints are acts of love and devotion. They are gifts from the hearts of devotees. They are forms of respect and honour. By displaying the spiritual status of a *waliullah*, love is thereby implanted within the hearts of the people. From the vantagepoint of our first floor balcony we watched a seemingly endless procession of *chadar* bearers in the narrow street beneath. *Chadars* of many sizes and colours, some purchased from the stores in the lanes surrounding the *Dargah*, others brought from faraway places, lovingly sewn and embroidered by devotees in distant cities and villages and even in other countries. The most luxurious one was from Hyderabad Deccan. It was huge. Perhaps eighty devotees held the edges whilst dozens more walked underneath holding it aloft. Walking ahead were the musicians playing that unmistakable beat—the *dhamal*—on *dholaks* and larger barrel-shaped drums. Everyone was singing. So much exuberance and love, it was beautifully infectious. The *chadar* probably took an entire year to complete with its lavish embroidery of Khwaja Gharib Nawaz's *Mazar* encircled by stars and flowers and birds.

The ceremony of placing a *chadar* is charged with emotion. It is a breathtaking experience in which the devotee takes his humble offering before the King. I remember when I was very young I saw photographs of the Royal Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II at Westminster Abbey in London. The crown, the long velvet train of her robe, the pomp and pageantry, what an enchantment! To carry a *chadar* is like taking part in a coronation. But at this coronation in Ajmer Sharif everyone is welcome, the doors are wide open, beckoning the poor, the wealthy, the healthy, the infirm, men, women, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Hindus, Parsis, beckoning and inviting all to place their offerings on the *Mazar* and to receive the blessings of the *Sultan-ul-Hind*.

Haji Maqbool Ahmed Sabri, Mehmood and I, alongwith the rest of the group made preparations for the ceremony. In our room Mehmood recited the *Fatiha* and *dua's* over several boxes of sweets that were then distributed. We then climbed through the lanes to the *Darbar* and spread out our *chadar*, carrying it high above our heads at arms length, each of us holding onto the outer corners and edges. And as we proceeded to cross the crowded courtyard, Sabri Saheb and Mehmood and the group all sang the traditional song that is sung when *chadars* are laid upon the *Mazars* of the Awliya'Allah. Passing devotees tried to touch or kiss the *chadar* for blessings.

There are hundreds of thousands of people present in Ajmer Sharif during the *Urs*. And each one hopes to enter the Inner Sanctum of the *Mazar* to offer salutations and seek blessings from Khwaja Gharib Nawaz. The *khadims* try to keep an orderly flow of devotees passing through the *Mazar* but there is always congestion, squeezing and constriction as they push and shove in their eagerness and impatience to enter. Our *khadims* were waiting near the *Mazar* to escort us to the presence of Khwaja Saheb. With the *qawwals* encircling me in a wall of protection, we somehow managed to flow on this wave of fervour to the sanctity of the interior. Our *khadims* helped us weave our way, through the dense mass of devotees, to the railing that encloses the actual grave. There is immense solemnity at this place. Devotees and lovers engage in silent communion with Khwaja Saheb, offering prayers, giving salaams from the many friends back home, private moments when each is lost in his or her own personal dialogue, outpourings of the heart to the Friend of Allah.

It had only been a few weeks earlier that Mehmood had said, 'Take us to India!' and here we were, standing in the presence of Khwaja Saheb at his *Mazar*. When Khwaja Saheb calls, everything just falls into place.

Auspicious moments and blessings descend as we stand beside the tomb. One of our *khadims* lifted a corner of the topmost fragrant *chadar* on the *Mazar* and pulled it over my head and Mehmood's, both of us sheltered and protected under the shadow of Khwaja Saheb. Acceptance. Blessing. Consent. There are many who come away from Ajmer Sharif with their questions answered, their prayers fulfilled, their directions clarified. It is said that wonderful things happen at the *Mazars* of the Awliya'Allah. *'There's no cure but the taste of what the saints pass round!'*

* * * *

There is one sacred place in Ajmer Sharif that I did not visit because I did not even know about it till after my *ziyarats*. But when I went to South Africa in 2002 I saw a photo, the face of a *waliullah*. And that face was one of the most beautifully luminous faces I have ever seen. It was Hazrat Shah Mohamed Ibrahim Soofie. And his *Mazar* is in Ajmer Sharif, midway up the hill of Taragarh overlooking the *Darbar* of Khwaja Gharib Nawaz. His *murids* and devotees call him Shah Saheb.

Hazrat Shah Ibrahim was born in India in 1880, and was the eldest son of Soofie Saheb, the great Indian Saint who devoted many years of his life to establishing mosques and *madrasas* and orphanages throughout South Africa during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hazrat Shah Ibrahim's *Pir-O-Murshid* was Hazrat Shaykh Khwaja Habib Ali Shah of Hyderabad Deccan. Shah Ibrahim's love of Khwaja Gharib Nawaz was so immense that he chose never to marry. He passed away at the age of 75 in 1955 and his humble *Mazar*, with its distinctive pale yellow Chishti-Nizami-Habibi dome, is said to be on the very site where Khwaja Saheb used to keep his horses. Shah Saheb never ever entered the *Mazar Sharif* of Khwaja Gharib Nawaz, the Saint whom he loved so much. He said that there were so many 'visitors from the spiritual realm' at the *Mazar*, if one could see them with the inner eye, the *basira* then one would 'shudder to enter.' *Subhanallah!* Shah Saheb would never enter because he could 'see' the reality. Yet we ignorant blind ones, lost in illusion, try to get as close as we possibly can!

* * * *

In the Darbar

The early hours of the morning in the *Darbar* of Khwaja Saheb. We are caught and crushed in the rush of ecstatic devotees. Delicate water of roses sprayed into the warm air, falling gently upon us in fine mists, filling our eyes, wetting our hair, our faces. Fragrance of the Sufi Saint. Dozens of hands reaching out. Longing to touch, to embrace the *qawwals*. Wanting a share of the blessings from this feast of spiritual music. Kissing their hands. Touching their feet. Outpourings of love. Hindustani faces bright with emotion. Tear filled eyes. Enraptured

smiles. Wave after wave of devotion and admiration flows over the *qawwals* from Pakistan. I am pressed tightly behind the *dervish qawwal*, a lover of Khwaja Saheb. Other lovers of the Sufi Saint press forward to kiss and hug him. Placing his hand on their bowed heads, he transmits *barkat* and blessings. From the midst of the crowd a hand extends towards mine. Lips kiss my rings! Why such honour for me! Carried on this tide of emotion across the marble courtyard the *dervish qawwal* and I pause in front of the shining gilded doors of the *Mazar*. Whispered greetings and prayers offered to the Sufi Saint who rests within. May Allah Shower him with Mercy and Peace. Enveloped in the lingering scent of sacred red roses we both move from the crowd, leaving Haji Maqbool, the famous and charismatic *qawwal*, surrounded by his adoring fans. Silently we slip away into the intricate maze of narrow lanes outside the *Dargah*. This night's *mehfil* is over in the *Darbar* at Ajmer Sharif.

* * * *

Silent Sleepers

Standing at the top of the stairs overlooking the expanse of the *Darbar*. Above us a velvety indigo canopy of Indian sky. Beneath us a rich carpet of intricately intertwined human forms spreading across the cool marble courtyard. Silently we descend. Softly our garments swish. Slightly our bracelets tinkle. Lightly and carefully we tread, weaving our way amongst the silent sleepers. Brilliantly coloured Rajasthani clothes subdued and softened under the serenity of the starlit night. Deep rhythmic breathing. Dreams hanging suspended in the air. Trust and devotion. Devotees and beggars. Mothers and babies. *Faqirs* and *dervishes*. Lovers of Khwaja Saheb. Lights of his Blessed Dome illuminating the two darknesses: the darkness of the night and the darkness of the human heart.

'Light the lamp of Love in the darkness of my heart, Ya Khwaja!'

* * * *

The Tea-Making Faqir

The sun has not yet risen over Ajmer Sharif though her rays are beginning to light the skies. Muffled sounds of stirring humanity.

Fluttering of wings as the pigeons awake. A young *faqir* squats beside a small fire, patiently feeding twigs and sticks into the flames, absorbed in his task. His name is 'Chand' meaning moon. Unexpectedly pale skin. Like silver amidst the burnished bronze faces of the other *faqirs*. Serene almond shaped eyes. Green-and-red turban. Wooden bracelets. Amber beads. Performing his spiritual duty. Giving food to all those who gather under the beautiful Moghul arches in this secluded and blessed corner of the *Dargah Sharif*.

The *dervish qawwal* and I have not slept. As soon as his *mehfil* finished, we made our way through the quiet lanes and narrow alleys that radiate from and lead to the *Mazar* of the Saint. Stopping here and there for brief exchanges of greetings or the inevitable cup of *chai*. Now our pleasure is to sit with new friends, these *faqirs* and *qalandars*, *malangs* and *dervishes*, in the world but not of the world, amongst other solitary travellers, lovers of the Sufi Saint.

> I have no rules or regulations,
> Nor heart nor religion—
> Only I remain, and you, sitting in the corner,
> And the wealth of Poverty.
>
> —Fakhruddin 'Iraqi

The fire burns brightly. Milk and water start to boil in a large pot. I am enchanted by this young tea-maker. Devoted to his important job. Totally centred and focused. Whispering blessings and remembrances as he measures out and sprinkles sugar and tea-leaves. The love with which this tea is being prepared, surely it will intoxicate us! Chand pours steaming hot *chai* into dozens of tiny cups. Carefully he watches the two older *faqirs* as they distribute our blessed breakfast, making sure that each and every one of the awakened sleepers has received his share. Somehow I feel so perfectly at ease, at home in this corner, across the seas, faraway from my birthplace, one white woman amidst this strange array of Indian men. But always and everywhere I am safe and protected in the company of the *dervish qawwal*.

* * * *

In the Shadow of Taragarh

Slipping on our shoes, we descend the crowded stairs and enter the congested stream of passing humanity as they struggle to reach or

depart from the *Dargah Sharif*. It is almost impossible to move forwards through the crush in the *bazaar* that surrounds the *Dargah*. So we resign ourselves to being pushed and jostled, squashed and trodden upon. But, this is *Urs* and Khwaja's lovers have come from far and wide to participate in the festivities. Here we learn patience, allowing compassion and joy to flow. This is not the place or time for complaint or anger.

Moving away from the Khwaja's court towards the hills. A brother from the *Darbar* wants to take us somewhere on the outskirts of town, a rendezvous with someone. Gradually the crowd lessens, thins out and walking becomes easier. Quietly we talk. An infinite black sky opening above us. Pebbles and gravel crushing lightly under our feet.
The mountain upon which stands Taragarh Fort towers silently above us as we wind our way along the dirt tracks amongst the camps of the poor lovers and *faqirs*. Glowing fires amongst the scrub and low trees light our way in the darkness. Makeshift shelters. Ragged children excited with curiosity run to us, holding our hands, our clothes, staring up into our faces through the blackness of the night, trying to make out the features of the strange white lady and the even stranger *dervish qawwal*.

We move further into the darkness. Whispered salaams as we pass groups of men, huddled together, their large heavy-lidded *surma*-lined eyes penetrating the darkness through a veil of pungent smoke. Lost in their dreams, their visions. Reaching another shelter enveloped in the yellow glow of lamplight, our friend from the *Darbar* disappears into the shadowy scrub beyond. We sip steaming sweet *chai* and wait. The smell of warm earth as the moon rises into the starry night. Opposite, under a low tree, an ancient woman in tatters has spread her merchandise on a cloth. With hennaed fingers she moves her prayer beads, softly reciting praises of her Lord. We squat to examine her wares, and choose two items. I select a delicate *tasbih* of tiny smoky greyish-brown glass beads shot through with gleaming lights of yellow, and Mehmood gathers some contorted roots of a medicinal plant. Our friend emerges from his shadowy meeting. We turn to retrace our steps back to the *Darbar*.

Ya Khwaja! Sitting in the dust at the end of a track under the mysterious presence of a huge mountain, one old woman, selling prayer beads and herbal remedies in the dark. Ya Khwaja! What a marvellous array of lovers you invite!

* * * *

The Lovers of Khwaja Saheb

The streets were deserted as we sat quietly drinking *chai* in the pre-dawn hours. Mehmood's mood was utterly serious. We had just finished a *mehfil* in the Darbar. The intoxication was still clinging to him.

Suddenly he asked passionately, 'Tell me? Who are the lovers of Khwaja Saheb? Tell me? The *khadims* or the *qawwals*? Who?'

I looked into the eyes of this gentle *qawwal*.

Again his emphatic question,'Tell me? Who are the true lovers of Khwaja Saheb?'

My eyes filled with tears.

'The *qawwals*,' I whispered in reply, qualifying my answer with, 'Some *qawwals*!'

'No! All *qawwals*. Not some *qawwals*. *All qawwals* are the lovers of Khwaja Saheb!'

I am tongue tied and humbled to the depths. He is a true lover of Khwaja Saheb, a true slave of Allah, in his essence, whilst I just carry the name 'Slave of Allah' without being in total submission and surrender.

'All *qawwals* are the lovers of Khwaja Saheb.'

A divinely inspired *qawwal* is a true lover of Khwaja Saheb. *Qawwali* is an ocean of Divine Beauty in which he drowns again and again, each moment being given new life. *Qawwali* is a fire of *'ishq* in which he burns like the phoenix only to be raised from the ashes to sing more songs of inexpressible yearning.

'All *qawwals* are the lovers of Khwaja Saheb!'

* * * *

And a Botswanan Connection

The Saints of the Chishti *Silsila* connect people. They bring people together in the most unexpected places, even in faraway Botswana.

On my visit to Botswana in 2002, my hosts took me on a brief excursion to a beautiful citrus orchard in the middle of the flat scrubby terrain outside the village with the tongue-twisting name of Molepolole. After strolling through the orange, lemon, and mandarin trees we entered a deserted farmhouse and climbed the stairs. As I stood in the large empty upstairs room, with a high thatched roof and polished wooden floors, I exclaimed, 'What a perfect place for *qawwali*!' I was

depart from the *Dargah Sharif*. It is almost impossible to move forwards through the crush in the *bazaar* that surrounds the *Dargah*. So we resign ourselves to being pushed and jostled, squashed and trodden upon. But, this is *Urs* and Khwaja's lovers have come from far and wide to participate in the festivities. Here we learn patience, allowing compassion and joy to flow. This is not the place or time for complaint or anger.

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already visualising Haji Maqbool and Mehmood with their musicians and many enraptured lovers lost in the music. 'Insha'Allah one day we will have a *qawwali mehfil* here.'

My daydreaming was interrupted by the sound of footsteps on the stairs. We turned to greet a young man. He knew I was visiting the orchard and had come especially to meet me. After being introduced, he kept looking carefully at my face. I smiled, somewhat disconcerted by the intensity of his gaze. He returned my smile, his eyes wide and bright with amazement.

'I know you!' he said excitedly. 'Yes, I know you!'

His statement bewildered my hosts and me too. I had never seen this stranger before.

'I know you! I saw you in Ajmer Sharif at the *Urs* in 1999. You were sitting with the Sabri Brothers at their *qawwali mehfil* outside the *Mazar* of Khwaja Saheb!'

Here in the wilds of Botswana, an unexpected meeting to be sure, connected and brought together by the blessings of Khwaja Gharib Nawaz.

* * * *

Leaving Ajmer Sharif was a sad experience. The ten days of our visit had been exhilarating, passionate and exhaustingly joyous. We wanted to stay. There is a powerful Sabri *qawwali* called *Aap ki khatir apno ko chora*, with poetry written by Haji Maqbool and Omar Daraz, a nephew of Haji Maqbool and Mehmood. *'I have turned from everything in this world and left it all because of you, but I will never let go of your shirt, Ya Khwaja.'* That is how we felt. However we would now have to return to the worldly world. But we would always be clinging to the *daaman*, the shirt of Khwaja Gharib Nawaz.

Our last *ziyarat* to the *Mazar* was filled with subdued yearning. We were all visibly sad. Our actions, our slow footsteps, our moist eyes betrayed the aching of our hearts. Standing again beside the *Sultan-ul-Hind* offering our last salaams and supplications, whilst our *khadims* performed the final ceremony. Long thin strips of brilliant cerise pink cotton cloth were gently rubbed on the *Mazar* and then tied around the heads of each member of our party—Haji Maqbool, Mehmood and their musicians and *qawwals*. Another wider piece of orange and cerise and black cloth, the distinctive Rajasthani *chundri*, was rubbed upon the *Mazar* and then softly placed over my head. These cerise headbands

are the symbol of the devotees' departure from the *Urs*. Haji Maqbool and Mehmood were then blessed with the gift of two *chadars* directly from the Mazar Sharif—green and gold *chadars*. One of them now rests, here in Pakistan, on our shelf together with the blessed *chadars* from Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya and Baba Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakar. After our poignant farewell and last glances at the *Darbar*, trying to take in and retain all that beauty and joy, we descended the hill back to our packed luggage. In the meeting room at Wali Manzil our *khadims* present us with many small bags of *tabarruk*, blessed sweets, sacred threads and fragrant rosepetals, to be distributed amongst the group for their families and friends back in Pakistan.

Throughout our time at the *Urs* I often heard the words, 'Thank you so much. Our big thanks to you Amatullah, the Australian lady, it is you who brought the Sabri Brothers to the *Urs* again!' But I hadn't done anything. It was all Khwaja Gharib Nawaz's doing. He had invited us and we came. He had called us and we answered.

The magic of the *Urs* clung to us, enveloping and protecting us amidst the utter chaos of Ajmer railway station with its mass of humanity and mountains of baggage. Ajmer Sharif seemed to be before our eyes throughout the long slow haul back to Delhi. We had left Ajmer Sharif but our spirits were still high because before returning to Pakistan we planned to stay near the *Mazar* of Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya for just a few days. Not wanting to be torn away from the Chishti Saints.

* * * *

The experience of being present at a Sabri *mehfil* in a *Darbar* filled with devotees is overwhelming. I have already described the joy, elation, ecstasy and extreme bliss of such gatherings. But perhaps it is even more overwhelming when there aren't any devotees in attendance and the Sabri Brothers sing purely and solely for the Saint himself. Actually all *qawwals* are in reality singing for the Saint even when there are countless devotees present at a *Darbar*. However, I felt the intensity of the connection between the Sabri Brothers and the Saint more acutely is the stillness of a deserted *Mazar*, the immense love they have for the Saint, and the passion and longing in their voices and music. I have tasted the spiritual sweetness of such *mehfils* on several occasions in India at the *Mazars* of the Chishti Saints.

On each of our journeys to India whilst in Delhi we have made *ziyarat* to the *Mazar* of Hazrat Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki and each visit has been well after midnight. On one such *ziyarat* we all squeezed into a hired van, and travelling rapidly through Delhi's near deserted streets, quickly reached the entrance to the *Darbar*. *Faqirs* and devotees were sleeping on the sides of the long path leading up to the *Mazar*. Some watched us through glazed eyes as we passed whilst others reached out their hands for money. One small group of men sitting solemnly with lighted candles recited verses of the Holy Qur'an over the body of a recently departed soul.

It was too late for us to enter the tranquil *Mazar*, which is set in the middle of a walled 'meadow'. Yet we reached the 'Deorhi' gate leading to the courtyard and here we sat for many minutes of silent prayer and meditation. There were only six or seven other devotees present at that early hour. The harmoniums, *tabla*, and *dholak* were placed amongst some slender columns facing the shining 'Deorhi' gate and then, for an hour Haji Maqbool and Mehmood softly sang in honour of, and for the pleasure of, Hazrat Qutbuddin Kaki, their words and gestures directed beyond the gleaming gate to his sanctified presence.

* * * *

Hazrat Khwaja Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki was born in 569 AH in a town called Awash in Transoxania. He belonged to the direct lineage of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) through Hazrat Imam Husain. He was named Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar. When he was seventeen-years of age, he met Khwaja Mu'inuddin Chishti who, instantly perceiving his immense spiritual receptivity and preparedness, initiated him into the Chishti *Silsila*. In the following years both undertook extensive individual journeys and eventually reunited briefly in Multan. However Hazrat Qutbuddin soon departed from Multan, which was under the spiritual jurisdiction of the Suhrawardi Master Shaykh Baha'uddin Zakariya. The Sufi Masters had great respect for each other's areas of activity and one Sufi Master would not intrude upon the territory of another Master.

Hazrat Qutbuddin proceeded to Delhi where the Sultan Iltamish received him with great warmth offering him official postings, urging him to stay close to the Sultan's court. But Hazrat Qutbuddin was a man of severe asceticism and adhered strictly to the Chishtis' code of distancing themselves from government and court affairs. Nevertheless

a time came when the intrigues in Delhi, instigated by a jealous government-appointed cleric with the title *Shaykh al-Islam*, began making trouble for Hazrat Qutbuddin. This distressing situation prompted Khwaja Gharib Nawaz to visit Delhi with the intention of bringing his *khalifa* back to Ajmer, but the entire city of Delhi became grief-stricken at the thought of losing Hazrat Qutbuddin. Khwaja Saheb was deeply moved by this display of love and loyalty so he allowed his *khalifa* to remain there.

Hazrat Qutbuddin and his family lived under extremely frugal conditions and often he was forced, by necessity, to borrow money from a grocer to buy food. However, he detested borrowing and one day resolved never to do so again. From that time onwards a small piece of bread, *kak*, appeared under his prayer mat every day. And from this miracle he was given the title Kaki.

Hazrat's life was one of both extreme austerity and extreme ecstasy for he was a great lover of *sama'* and often fell into rapture during the audition of *qawwali*. His soul, like a yearning bird trapped within a cage, would take wing and ascend to the highest spiritual realms in his ecstasy. And it is in this manner that the great Chishti Saint passed away—in ecstasy. At a *mehfil-e sama'* the *qawwals* sang a couplet from the *Divan* of Shaykh Ahmad-i Jam: 'All those who by the sword of submission are killed; *each moment from the Unseen with new life are filled.*' Hazrat Qutbuddin was instantly transported in his rapture. So overwhelmed was he that he had to be carried home, and all the while the *qawwals* repeated those intoxicating verses. For four days and nights the *qawwals* kept repeating the same couplet. Each time the first line was sung Hazrat would fall down, and when the second couplet was sung he would immediately rise again. For four days and nights he remained in ecstasy. Then on the fifth night, 14 Rabi al-Awwal 633 AH (AD 1235), Hazrat Khwaja Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki passed away and returned to his Beloved.

He was buried in a meadow outside of Delhi because at one time, when he had passed by this meadow, he had paused and said, 'This earth has the fragrance of hearts!' His tranquil *Mazar* rests in the midst of this 'fragrant' meadow in Mehrauli, now a highly urbanised area of Delhi.

* * * *

Our private after-midnight *mehfil* at the Mazar of Hazrat Qutbuddin Kaki was gentler, sweeter and more touching than usual. Haji Maqbool and Mehmood sang with so much love and restrained passion. Perhaps this delicate and tender mood, which enveloped the Sabris and the few of us who were present, was emanating from the Saint himself. The Chishti Saint who had returned to his Beloved during the *qawwali*.

* * * *

Close to the beautiful Jami Mosque in the old city of Delhi, is the discreet *Mazar* of Shaykh Kaleemullah Chishti. Born into the illustrious family of gifted architects who built splendours such as the Taj Mahal, the Jami Mosque and the Red Fort, Shaykh Kaleemullah was educated at the finest *madrasas* and colleges. Yet, one day his life changed. He was smitten with a maid who cared not in the least for him. So desperate was he that he fled to a *majzub* and implored him to pray that she too would love him as he did her! The following day the maid displayed great affection but it was too late! The *majzub* had filled Shaykh Kaleemullah's heart with yearning for Divine Love. His spiritual journey then began. The *majzub* sent him to Shaykh Yahya Madani in Madina who initiated him into the Chishti *Silsila*. He quickly traversed the stages of the spiritual journey and was granted the robes of succession, *khilafat*, by Shaykh Yahya who sent him back to the Mughal capital, Delhi, to work for the *Silsila*. He set up his home, *khanqah* and *madrasa* in a busy market area directly between the Jami Mosque and the Red Fort. Here he initiated numerous men and women into the Chishti *Silsila*, many of them Hindus who were not compelled to leave their religion. Shaykh Kaleemullah wrote several treatises on medicine and astrology and his two most acclaimed works on Sufi theory and practice, *Muraqqa'* (The Patchwork Robe) and *Kashkul* (The Begging Bowl) hold distinguished positions within the Chishti *Silsila*. Shaykh Kaleemullah passed away in 1142 AH (AD 1729) and was buried within his humble *khanqah*, midway between the two architectural glories of Mughal Delhi.

The gates were padlocked when we arrived at the *Mazar* of Shaykh Kaleemullah around two in the morning. However, even though there was no obvious entry we were not deterred. We kept looking for a way in. Near a side gate we discovered a very tiny opening, only big enough for one person to slither and slide through. So, one by one the Sabris and myself slithered and slid through, dragging the harmoniums and

tabla behind us. A few devotees who were sleeping inside the *Darbar* woke up and sat in readiness for the *qawwali*. But, the *qawwals* had come for the Saint and they were singing purely for him. The devotees just happened to be there too. Sitting beneath a tree with stars shining overhead, Haji Maqbool and Mehmood sang for Shaykh Kaleemullah Chishti. Then we departed by the way we came—out through the slot!

* * * *

A solitary *mehfil* at the *Mazar* of Hazrat Inayat Khan, Mehmood sang alone. Only he and I were physically present with the Saint. I had been urging Mehmood to make *ziyarat* with me having told him something of this Saint's greatness, that he was a gifted musician who had taken the Sufi Message to the West at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Apparently, whilst on a visit to Delhi, only weeks before his passing away, Hazrat Inayat Khan was surveying, from a watchtower, the *Darbar* of Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya. He remarked to his companion, Khwaja Hasan Nizami, that he felt at peace and happy in this place. When Khwaja Nizami responded that he was most welcome to stay, Hazrat Inayat said, 'Yes, when I come I will stay forever!' And so he did.

In the still of the afternoon, when the lanes were enveloped in the lazy hours of siesta, Mehmood and I walked a short distance from the *Darbar* of Nizamuddin Awliya to the Sufi Centre and the *Mazar* of Hazrat Inayat Khan. The garden and courtyard were empty. We climbed the stairs to where the Saint lay. After our salaams and *du'as*, Mehmood sat right next to the *Mazar* directly facing the Saint. I sat nearby. Then Mehmood sang. It was extremely moving, utterly tranquil. For three or four minutes he sang his song purely and solely for Hazrat Inayat Khan. So simple and spontaneous! Mehmood didn't even have his harmonium. Just his voice!

> You think you hear
> a nightingale's song...
> No. It is the Voice
> of the Rose.
>
> – Fakhruddin 'Iraqi

* * * *

On this morning in October 1999, there are many visitors in the *hujra*, the small chamber of Pir Iqbal Nizami, *Sajjada Nashin* of the *Mazar* of Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya. Outside the windows is the *Baoli*, a large stone pool or reservoir filled with water in which many children are now frolicking. The *Baoli* was constructed under the directions of Hazrat Nizamuddin and apparently there is a miracle behind its construction. The King, who was a severe adversary of Hazrat, tried to prevent the construction of the pool. He prohibited all masons and labourers to work on it and he even forbade the sale of oil for lamps in order to prevent the work from continuing into the night. All the *murids* and *khalifas* worked throughout seven days and nights to construct the reservoir. Following Hazrat's instructions they inserted wicks into earthen bowls filled with water and lit them. To everyone's amazement the wicks burned brightly in the water, without any oil. And so the construction was completed.

At the end of the *hujra* is the grave of Pir Saheb's father, covered with a yellow *chadar* and fresh rosepetals. There are many prayers and words of consultation and advice for the many devotees and visitors. Gradually the *hujra* empties as each request is attended to. Mehmood and I are alone with Pir Saheb and his scribe. We had been hoping for these long-awaited moments of spiritual converse. The fragrance of red roses wafts through the small chamber. Quiet footsteps of devotees echo along the marble corridors. Outside the window the high-pitched voices of the children in the *Baoli* and the sound of splashing water. Pir Saheb smiles gently and utters softly spoken words of immense importance. We drink tiny cups of sweet *chai* and eat fresh dates. An intimate celebration, a tranquil scene witnessed by the great saint Hazrat Nizamuddin and his devoted *murid* Amir Khusrau who both rest so very near to us. Quickly Mehmood and I go to their *Mazars* to offer our salaams, give thanks and make our *du'as*.

* * * *

Our last night in Delhi, the night of our departure, our return to Pakistan. Not wanting to leave. Longing to stay, clinging to Nizamuddin Awliya! Our numerous bags, suitcases, harmoniums, *dholaks*, *tablas* are carried downstairs and piled onto the roadside to await the vans that will take us to Old Delhi Railway Station. My heart is utterly contracted. Tears go inwards. Hidden from view. Members of the group sit around or wander up and down the street. Waiting. Smoking.

There is still time for one last *ziyarat* to the *Mazar* of Nizamuddin Awliya so I hurry alone through the darkening street. I pass that old *dervish* in the corridor, the *dervish* with the heavily *surma*-lined eyes, the one whose glance is piercing. I quickly squat in front of him seeking his *du'a*. A gleam of light flashes from his deep eyes, gentle and so loving, and the hint of a smile. Within the *Darbar* it is tranquil. My agitation subsides. The Saint's tenderness envelops each soul who comes to him. I sit at his door, as close as any woman is permitted to go in this realm.

> I have not found one living person to whom I can pour out what is in my heart. Only you Nizamuddin. Only you. I sit at your feet. Clinging to your shirt. Silent language. Beyond words. Almost beyond thought. Pure yearning. Pure heartbreak. Only you Nizamuddin. Only you.

My forehead rests against the cool marble and my fingers interlace the delicate filigree. Slowly I repeat the word, *'Istiqamat. Istiqamat. Istiqamat!'* Steadfastness. Steadfastness. Steadfastness.

The story is told of how one night the young *murid* Nizamuddin Awliya was keeping watch at the door of his *Pir-O-Murshid* Baba Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakar who was in deep meditation and prayer. Nizamuddin looked inside the cell at the precise moment of a descent of spiritual ecstasy upon the Saint. Seizing the blessed opportunity, Nizamuddin boldly placed his request before his *Murshid* knowing that his entreaty would be granted because of the extreme ecstasy. *'Istiqamat!'* he cried. 'Granted!' came the reply from his rapturous Master. In later years Hazrat Nizamuddin was to state that he wished he had asked his *Murshid* Baba Farid to grant him a different request—rather than asking for *istiqamat*, steadfastness in spiritual endeavour, he should have asked to pass away in ecstasy during the *qawwali* audition.

My tears have dried. The fragrance of roses and the soft murmuring of devotees in *zikr*. My last *ziyarat* during this journey to India. The breeze is cool and my heart is at peace.

I hear soft footsteps beside me. It is Mehmood. *'Subhanallah!'* he whispers and then beckons me to come. We join the group, climb into the van and go to the train that will take us back to Lahore. Soon the journey to India will be over. But our hearts will always remain with Khwaja Gharib Nawaz and the Chishti Saints because all of us are—*'Khwaja Ki Diwani.'*

11

Scattered Pictures of Pakistan

Ya Qalandar!

Sitting inside my friend's home, *tasbih* in hand, reciting my *zikr* in the month of Ramazan. The familiar sound of a drum. Ahh, surely it is a *bandarwala*. I go to the door and listen. Drum beats getting louder. Moments later two scruffy *bandarwalas* with a bear, a goat and a monkey, stroll past at a distance in front of the house. I want to greet them. But they haven't yet seen me, so they start walking away. Oh,don't go! Come closer with your music and your strange pets. Mental connection. One turns. Sees me. 'Ya Qalandar!' they call to me. I smile. 'Ya Ali!' they cry. 'Ya Ali!' I echo. The men are young, grey and grubby but with such beautiful smiles under the grime. I stand at the gate, watching them ramble towards me. Bear shuffling alongside. Goat strutting in proud goat fashion. Monkey jumping and climbing onto his master's shoulder. One young man blows into the old piped instrument, the *shahnai*, with its tattered coloured tassels dangling and swaying. Such a poignant sound! So sad, whether here on the dusty seaside in Karachi, or in the mists of the Scottish Highlands. The other young man beats on his drum. I love this sound. *Dhamal*! The intoxicated dance at the Sufi *Mazars* during *Urs* festivals. 'Ya Qalandar!' I pass money to them. 'Ya Ali! Ya Ali!' Smiles and salaams. Then this strange band of misfits moves away through the deserted streets of fashionable Seaview, hoping to earn a few rupees with their music, their bear, their goat and their monkey. So often these *bandarwalas* are treated with contempt or disgust. Are these street urchins addicted to sniffing solvents? I don't know, but still, 'Ya Qalandar!' 'Ya Ali!'

* * * *

Ship of the Desert

It is mid afternoon at the end of Ramazan and we are stuck in our Suzuki van in a traffic jam on Bunder Road. The pollution is suffocating. Tempers are high. Patience is at a minimum. Karachi's monotonous symphony. The incessant tooting of bikes and cars. The highly disagreeable and intensely irritating noise of bus horns, blasting the surrounding chaos with a sound so objectionable as to create turmoil and pain in the solar plexus. We wait patiently, our van creeping forward inch by inch towards our destination—a recording studio in the heart of Saddar.

A little ahead of us, standing aloof in the midst of humanity's madness—one majestic camel, striding forward with such nobility, pulling his loaded cart. The perfect image of serenity and detachment.

'Look at that beautiful camel! So cool and calm. Not caring about *dunya*. Undisturbed by all of it. Doing his job. Not complaining. Pulling the load that has been given to him by his master. But look! He's not here. He is with Allah. He's looking up, not down. It's all the same for him whether he is in crazy Karachi or the solitude of the Sahara Desert. He's above all of it. In the world, not of the world. Oh, to be like that! We must try to remember this camel.'

* * * *

Brief Encounter

We are on our way to Lahore by train for a recording session. The *dervish qawwal* sleeps soundly in the middle bunk. I am restless. I can no longer lie in that bottom coffin that they call a berth. I am dreadfully uncomfortable, but am so used to discomfort by now. In the lower AC carriages of Pakistani trains there is never room to sit straight if the middle bunk is in use. So I sit, crouched forwards, elbows resting on knees, chin resting in hands, observing the goings-on around me. Still many hours of travel left. I am the only woman in a carriage full of men. Surrounded by Pakistanis, sleeping, chatting, chewing pan, playing cards or simply waiting patiently to reach their destinations. No one reads books here. The sad truth of being a writer in Pakistan. Quite nearby are two young European men—physical travellers, complete with rucksacks, sleeping bags and the usual hitchhiker

trappings. One of them writes in his diary. He raises his head often, collecting his thoughts and then returns to his notes. I hear snippets of their conversation. How nice to hear English being spoken. They make me smile with hidden laughter at their funny observations of the strange happenings on the train. I recall being similarly intrigued and amazed at the spectacle during my first train journey through Pakistan—a gruelling 30 hours from Rawalpindi to Karachi in mid-summer. But it's all so familiar and commonplace now. No more charm, just discomfort and copious cups of Pakistan Railways *chai* and waiting to get to where I am going!!

So I sit with these young men, drawn together by our common language. I talk to them about Islam and *Tasawwuf* and *qawwali* and how I now live here in the East. They are genuinely astounded that a white woman should become Muslim and then give up everything in the West to start afresh in Pakistan. At times this also astounds me! We pass the time with exchanges of tales. On hearing my voice my companion stirs from sleep in his middle bunk, turns to check that I am okay, smiles and then plunges back into his dream realm. How I envy his ability to simply switch off and sleep through the monotony of the long haul to Lahore!

Before disembarking at our destination one of the young Europeans gave me his card but unfortunately I lost it soon afterwards outside the *Darbar* of Data Saheb.

As we approached the *Darbar* an inner voice was telling me to put my bag under my coat, to conceal and protect it. I heard it but did not heed to it. I ignored the inner sign and so, within only minutes my wallet had been stolen from my exposed bag by some of those ragged little street urchins hanging around the outskirts of the *Mazar*. There was quite a lot of money in it by Pakistani standards, plus a five hundred deutsche mark note and also the card of the young man from the train. Pity. He was a nice young man and I should have liked to keep in touch with him. Doesn't matter.

We stood beside the *Mazar* bathed in the intoxicating fragrance of red roses, whispering salaams and recitations, seeking blessings. After hot sweet *chai* we drove back through the still quiet streets of Lahore. But I wonder what those ragamuffins did with the five hundred deutsche mark note!

* * * *

Sketch of Karachi

Clifton Beach, Karachi. Eid day. March 2001. We drive along the seaside boulevard, now teaming with people of the suburbs, coming and going to and from the distant low tide waters of the bay. Camels, Palomino horses, *chai* and sweet vendors, women bedecked in mirrored, laced, ribboned, shining, sparkling garments. Outfits ranging from the gaudy and the discreet to the full *burqa*, ornate gold costume jewellery at throat, wrists, ears, nose, ankles, fingers. Overdone, but part of this culture. Figures silhouetted on the water's edge. Movement and noise. The mingled aromas of salt water and steaming hot *chai*. The inhabitants of the world are in restless motion on this festival day. The earth is at rest, at peace beneath the humans who move across her surface in a ceaseless dance.

Directing our gaze to the far horizon we watch the flaming red ball sinking into the ocean. Perfect sphere. Sublime Beauty. Radiant Sun. Instinctively I turn my head and look behind us. There, on the opposite horizon is another ball. This one is cool, silvery yellow and passive, tranquil. Full moon on the ascent, reflecting and transmitting the light of the descending flaming orb that she faces. Heart transmits the light of the spirit to the darkness of the soul. Moon transmits the light of the sun to the darkness of the night. '*And We shall show you Our signs on the horizons and in your own selves until you know that He is the Real.*' (Qur'an Sharif)

'I've only ever seen this once before.' The *dervish qawwal* smokes as I relate the story. 'In Australia about 17 years ago, I was on a beach on an island off the coast of Queensland. It was nearly sunset. I watched the sun growing redder and redder as it approached the horizon. As it was setting, a small flock of huge birds, pelicans, you know they have big beaks where they store fish and other food. These big birds flew past me, but not towards the sun. They were flying in the opposite direction. I remember saying to my companion, 'Why don't they fly towards the sun?' I turned to see where they were flying. *Subhanallah*! There was the silver moon, full and splendid. It was making its ascent into the evening sky. So beautiful! And these big birds were flying to greet it. I still remember the soft sound of their huge wings as they flew past. Wise birds. Wise pelicans.'

Our speed increases as we move along the boulevard. Darkening sky. Time for prayer. The setting sun. The crimson sphere, symbol of the Spirit, sinks into the Ocean of Divine Mercy. *Dervish qawwal* by

my side. Eating pan. *Surma* on eyes. Fragrant with *atr*. He looks to the West and bids his farewell to the day's sun. 'Allah Hafiz.' Man of simplicity and hidden wisdom. *Faqiri* wisdom. We turn the corner and head back towards the city. Eid is nearly over.

Memories of a Brief Friendship

11 September 2001. I have just offered sunset prayers in my room at the Dreamland Motel in Islamabad. Looking out at the beautiful Margala Hills, silhouetted serenely against the darkening sky, I exhale a breath of immense relief and joy. My journey and mission have been successful. Tomorrow I shall return to the Indian High Commission to collect our visas. Chaotic and polluted Karachi is left behind. Ahead lie mystical Delhi and blessed Ajmer Sharif. As in a dream I stand at the window in Dreamland Motel, lost in my sweet memories of our previous *ziyarats* to Hazrat Nizamuddin and Khwaja Gharib Nawaz. Filled with intense longing. Pervaded by a delicate sadness. The *dervish qawwal* is still in Karachi. We shall meet in Lahore in two days. *Insha'Allah*. Impulsively I pick up the phone and make a call to a new friend, eager to discuss the progress of our plans for the *qawwali* group's proposed tour of the States. 'Amatullah, turn on your television! Everything has changed. Everything has changed! Turn on your television and you will see what I mean.' Is this a dream? Is this a new disaster movie? What is this amazing spectacle unfolding before my eyes on a television screen in the peacefulness of an Islamabad evening? Two planes. Twin towers. The World Trade Center in New York City, symbol of the Capitalist world, crashing to the ground. 'Everything has changed!'

> The 26th day of November, 2001. Yes my new friend for such a brief time! 'Everything has changed.' Today I received a phone call from Atiya telling me of your passing from this world into the next realm of consciousness. And I had just sent you an email, only a few hours before. But, you were already gone, though I didn't know. Maybe our plans to take the qawwals on a tour of the States will materialise one day. Pity you won't be here to enjoy the spectacle. May the abode in which you dwell be filled with light. I pray for you now. I didn't when you were in this world. Strange! 'Everything has changed.

26 January 2002. Today we visited his grave. It was a pilgrimage for Atiya. She loved him so much. Bagh-e-Khorasan. A peaceful, clean and tidy enclosed graveyard—unusual for Karachi. Pale green surrounding walls, lawns and dozens of tall shady trees on the outskirts. A *Shia* graveyard. Hundreds of eagles circled high above the Mewa Shah Qabristan. Specks of black, swooping and soaring, sailing freely on the wind, like floating black paper. In front of us the pale silver almost full moon in the soft blue sky. The flaming setting sun behind us. Quietly we covered his grave with armfuls of fragrant red roses—whispering prayers and blessings on the Prophet. Aliya looked so beautiful. Head bowed. Eyes closed. Slender hand resting tenderly on the grave. A strong communication between two spiritual friends. Sajjad and I were planning to take the Sabri Brothers to the States. And now, here he lies in the Mewa Shah Qabristan, where, every Thursday night the Sabris sing at the nearby *Mazar* of Zahin Shah Taji Baba. Maybe one day my dream to take the Sabris to the USA will manifest!

* * * *

The King and the Ant

There is a story about a mighty King and an ant. The King stands at the top of his well, an immense well that goes deep, deep into the earth. He looks into his well, throws a pebble and waits to hear the distant echoing 'plop'. In a state of reverie and inner calm this mighty King contemplates his life, feeling content and pleased.

Gazing abstractedly into the depths, lost in daydreams, his attention is caught by one tiny black ant who is slowly yet determinedly climbing the inside wall of the well. The ant is carrying a piece of food and he is looking upwards towards the speck of light above—the top of the well, his goal and destination. Slowly he climbs, suffering fatigue and pain. Step after step. Pain and more pain. Tiredness and oh, the weight of his load!

'Onwards and Upwards! Onwards and Upwards! Onwards and Upwards!' chants the little ant. His mother taught him these magic words.

The mighty King keeps watching his tiny ant as he nears the top of the well. The goal is within reach. It is so close. The light above is radiant. It dazzles him. He is nearly there. Then ... he loses his grip and ... falls... back down to the ledge at the bottom of the well.

Silence. The deafening silence at the bottom of the well. There lies the little ant. Motionless. The lump of food is close beside him on the ground. Oh dear. Right back to where he started. Bewildered and bruised but, the goal is still ahead.

'Onwards and Upwards! Onwards and Upwards! My mother told me to say, Onwards and Upwards!'

The King keeps watching. With patience and trust the tiny little black ant picks up his load and once again starts climbing the inside wall of the well to the light at the top. Slowly, slowly and then ... just when the goal is within reach, 'Ahh!' He slips and falls—again, down to the depths. Into the abyss. Again, the silence.

Many times he tries to reach the light. His yearning never fades. It actually increases. 'I must reach! I must reach! This is my reason for living. This is my purpose in life! I must reach that light! Onwards and Upwards.'

The King is attentive. His eyes do not blink. Slowly his heart softens and melts as he witnesses this amazing spectacle. A spectacle, taking place in the darkness of a deep huge well! The spectacle of the private struggle and intense yearning of one tiny black ant to reach the light!

Once again he is climbing, steadily, patiently. The King smiles sweetly. How he loves this ant! Then, gently and with the utmost tenderness the mighty King reaches his arm into the well. Without pondering or questioning or wondering how or why, the little trusting ant climbs onto the King's finger and ... is lifted high, high into the air.

Onwards and Upwards.

Into the sunlight. Into the cool breeze.

One tiny black ant sitting on the fragrant arm of his beloved King.

* * * *

The Majzub

Many times I saw him, sitting on the side of the road or in an alleyway. Very close to our home in this congested colony. Covered from head to toe in dust. His hair was long and matted. He wore only a pair of trousers. He would always be smoking as he sat in the middle of a circle of hundreds of cigarette butts. No one ever bothered him and I don't suppose he ever bothered anyone. I wanted to give him something, money or food. But was unsure if I should. He was lost to

this world. One night Mehmood placed a bag of *biryani* in front of him but he just stared at it, uncomprehendingly. Sitting like a dusty Buddha, with dark glazed eyes. He's gone now. I haven't seen him for maybe a year or more. Disappeared into the dust!

* * * *

Stark Reality

Surrounded by poverty. People in need with outstretched upturned palms. O Allah! What to do? How can I not give? I have to write the next book. Now I no longer have enough money to buy a computer. So much poverty!

But, there is the fear that with time one may become immune to the conditions of surrounding humanity. To see, every day, the beggars waiting at every intersection, to hear, morning and night, the cries of the hungry seeking food, yet to retain the ability to always look with fresh eyes and listen with fresh ears so that the heart may not become hardened.

'Why do you give them money?' some ask me. 'This is an organised mafia. The bosses live out in the country, fat and happy. They round up all beggars and deformed and limbless people and put them on these intersections. All the money goes to the mafia!'

'Allah Knows! I just give.'

I never saw Mehmood refuse any outstretched hand.

* * * *

Between Two Worlds

Living in limbo. The indeterminate state between two worlds, two cultures. A lonely place indeed! Belonging neither to this country nor that country. No longer an Australian but never able to become a total Pakistani. I have great affection for both worlds yet I belong neither here nor there. And now I am unable to return to my so-called homeland because there's nothing to return to, except perhaps the gum trees and glorious expanse of golden deserted beaches. At times I yearn for the freedom to walk along the northern shore like we did in the past. Not another soul to be seen or heard, just the surf and the salty

spray and the wet sand and a pure contentment in the moment. Thank Allah for the experience.

But I cannot go back to that. I would be miserable and would yearn for the freedom of Karachi's chaos. Yes, there is a freedom here too, the freedom to lose oneself in the multitudes. Riding in a rickshaw through the polluted city streets I catch those fleeting passing images of humanity, images of pathos and joy and dignity and impoverishment that flood my heart with an intense love. Thank Allah for the experience.

Last night we were at a gathering. The inevitable segregation of men and women! How I loathe it! Crammed into one tiny room with a single ceiling fan we women are supposed to be spiritually uplifted by the *qawwali* that we are condemned to watch on a small video screen as it is relayed from the men's area. An intolerable situation for me! However on this occasion the *qawwals* too are suffering in their confined space under the intense heat of lights for video cameras. Yet my Pakistani sisters are well content. From birth they have been taught to observe such segregation so they accept it unquestioningly. They are happy and yes, they really are spiritually uplifted as they watch the *qawwals* on the small video screen. But after several hours of enduring the heat I escape from the constricting conditions, to push aside the curtain of *purdah* and stand under the night sky and stars, feeling the breeze on my damp skin, breathing in the freedom of being momentarily alone! How perfect the *qawwali* would have been out here in the coolness of evening! Thank Allah for the experience.

* * * *

The Nobility of Serving

I have been observing the servant and the one who is served, the slave and the master. And it struck me, when I was watching a young man massaging the legs of an older man, that the one who was serving actually had so much more dignity, so much more grace than the one who was reclining. There is such subtle nobility surrounding the servant. This culture is filled with servants and slaves and the ones they serve, their masters or elders. It's not like the West where we all seem to do everything for ourselves. Or if someone massages your tired legs then you'll have to pay by the hour. When I read the saying of Hazrat

Nizamuddin Awliya, 'The slave becomes the master' I thought perhaps it was indicating this nobility of the slave/servant.

* * * *

The Eclipse

A peaceful afternoon in the quiet colony, everyone is sleeping, the time of siesta. But neither of us is sleepy so we relax and talk and drink *chai*. A breeze starts to blow. The sky darkens, getting darker and darker. We stand at the window and watch. Soon the afternoon is plunged in the mysterious atmosphere of an eclipse. Silence descends upon the colony. In the grey stillness, as we behold the celestial miracle, Mehmood softly starts to sing a *Hamd*, a song in Praise of Allah. Gently, tenderly the words flow, serene yet majestic. Gradually the sky becomes brighter as the radiant light of the emerging sun swallows the darkness and the *Hamd* ascends.

* * * *

Without the Rose-coloured Glasses

'Seclusion from human society is not desirable. One should mix with people and face their blows and buffets,' said Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya. As this golden Chishti thread pulls me closer I find myself unavoidably in the company of people. And after that initial euphoria of living in 'the East' has somewhat subsided I understand just what blows and buffetings one is required to face. When compared to Pakistan, life in the seclusion of an Australian bushland retreat had been like living in the protection of a soft cottonwool house. But the lessons learned during the isolation of Australia really must be acted upon in Pakistan. Sufism is a living reality, to be lived and experienced, not simply theorised. In the words of Hazrat Inayat Khan, 'It is easier to gain mastery in the wilderness, away from all temptations, but the mastery you gain in the world is of much more value; for the former is easily thrown down by a slight stroke, while the latter, achieved in the crowd, will last forever.'

* * * *

A Chishti Home

Finding a safe home in Karachi was difficult because I was a foreigner, a '*gori*' (white) lady. We had to be extremely careful. We searched and looked at many flats. Landlords did not want the responsibility. The hunt continued for many more months. I was getting desperate but I should have realised that there was a reason behind the delay. Chishtis! The Chishti Saints were directing us to the perfect, secluded home in a side alley in one of Karachi's oldest colonies. A Chishti home, owned by a man who is a descendant of Shaykh Kaleemullah Chishti of Delhi, the saint whose Mazar we had entered through the tiny narrow 'slot'. The owner's wife comes from a family who are descendants of Hazrat Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki, the saint who had passed away in the ecstasy of qawwali! A gentle, loving, humble family of Chishti lovers with sun-like affection, river-like generosity and earth-like humility.

12

'You are a Chishti!'

The yellow and red woollen threads from the *Mazar* of Khwaja Mu'inuddin Chishti in Ajmer Sharif symbolise the humility and true love that form the heart of the Chishti teaching. In his final sermon to his followers, Khwaja Mu'inuddin Chishti expressed the very essence of Sufism.

Love all and hate none.
Mere talk of peace will avail you naught.
Mere talk of Allah and religion will not take you far.
Bring out all the latent powers of your being
and reveal the full magnificence of your immortal self.
Be surcharged with peace and joy,
and scatter them wherever you are and wherever you go.
Be a blazing fire of truth.
Be a beauteous blossom of love and be a soothing balm of peace.
With your spiritual light dispel the darkness of ignorance;
Dissolve the clouds of discord and war
and spread goodwill, peace and harmony among the people.
Never seek any help, charity or favours from anybody except Allah.
Never go to the courts of kings, but never refuse to bless and help
the needy and the poor, the widow and the orphan, if they come to your door.
This is your mission, to serve the people...
Carry it out dutifully and courageously, so that I, as your Pir-O-Murshid,
may not be ashamed of any shortcomings on your part
before the Almighty Allah
and our holy predecessors in the Silsila
on the Day of Judgement.

* * * *

It was the *Urs* Celebrations of Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya in July 2002. The ceremonies and celebrations were at the *khanqah* of Soofie Saheb in Pietermaritzburg, a small town inland from Durban in South Africa. I was the specially invited guest of Shah Irshad Soofie, great grandson of Soofie Saheb, *khalifa* in both Chishti-Nizami-Habibi and Sabiriyya *Silsilas*. It was Irshad who had met me three months earlier at the doors of Baba Farid's *Darbar* in Pakpattan Sharif.

On this cold July night the courtyard and mosque and adjoining buildings of the *khanqah* were crowded with thousands of devotees and lovers of the Sufi Saints. I had no idea there were so many intoxicated lovers in faraway South Africa! Shy at having so much attention focused on me, yet incredibly humbled by such an honour, I sat with other members of the Soofie family watching the *sandal* ceremony. A large bearded man with the most vibrant and passionate voice sang *Na'ats* and *Manqabats* as the procession slowly advanced across the courtyard to hoist the Chishti-Nizami-Habibi *Silsila's* red and pale yellow flag high atop the flagpole. This stirring ceremony, designed to pay homage to a Saint, a *wali*, during his *Urs*, reflects the immense love that people have for him and the exalted degree of respect in which he is held. It is a symbolical reminder of the bliss that is enjoyed by a beloved slave of Allah. Slowly the flag was raised, unfurling and fluttering as it reached the top, in honour of *Mehboob Ilahi*, Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya.

As the heart-melting songs floated through the chilly night air, men and women wept silently in the midst of an all-enveloping fragrance of burning sandalwood. Just as the bark of the sandal tree is crushed to release its fragrance, so too is the Saint, the *wali*, annihilated in his love of the Beloved. His spiritual fragrance then reaches far and wide, permeating the atmosphere and the hearts of his devotees. Burning sandalwood and the soft flapping of the flag. Shah Irshad began to speak. One of the gentlest and most mellow voices I have ever heard. Filled to overflowing with love of the Sufi Saints. Just listening to Irshad speak surely could kindle the dormant flame of *'ishq* in the breasts of potential lovers! Irshad was talking about me. I sat nervously, waiting. I was being presented with a gift. A beautiful creamy-white shawl was placed over my shoulders by one of the elders, a woman of the Soofi family. Then I heard unbelievable words, words so profound that it will take me years to begin to understand even a fragment of their meaning. Shah Irshad was welcoming me, 'my sister from Pakistan, Amatullah Armstrong CHISHTI!'

'Chishti!' The great grandson of Soofie Saheb was bestowing upon me and blessing me with the name Chishti, here at the *Urs* Celebrations of Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya. The thread, a Chishti thread! *'You are a Chishti!'*

After these emotional moments I was ushered inside a building to wait with family and other guests in a lounge beside which was a small, intimate and dimly lit chamber—a sanctified room where a Sacred Treasure was guarded. Within this small chamber was a Hair from the beard of the Holy Prophet Muhammad. *May Allah Shower him with Blessings and Peace.* A Treasure so exalted, so overflowing with blessings and mystical light, altogether bewildering and beyond comprehension. This Hair had been handed down through the Soofie family, Soofie Saheb being a descendant of Hazrat Abu Bakr Siddiq. And now the Blessed Hair had grown over fifty shoots. On this luminous night the Blessed Hair was ceremonially bathed in rose water, every drop of which was gathered and then sipped by us, fortunate ones, for inner purification and blessing.

It was a night of immense meaning, to be honoured with the name Chishti and to drink this Sacred Water. And I am only just now beginning to realise the profundity of those two 'miraculous' events in my life.

* * * *

During his lifetime, the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) gave hair from his beard and head, to his Companions who kept them as a source of blessing. Since that time the Blessed Hair has been passed down through families and Sufi *Silsilas*. Countless people throughout the world have these Treasures in their possession. On special occasions, such as the month of the Prophet's birth, Rabi al-Awwal, these Sacred Treasures are displayed. Rosewater is poured over the Blessed Hair supposedly as a shower for the Hair, but in reality it is the rosewater itself that becomes purified through contact with the Sacred Treasure. Drinking this rosewater is an act of love for the Holy Prophet Muhammad. And truly blessed is the one who drinks it! There are miraculous qualities in each Blessed Hair. The Hair casts no shadow. The Hair grows longer each year. A cloud will appear above the Hair if it is taken out into the sunlight. Every year a new shoot will appear on the Hair. Shah Walliullah of India confirmed that in a dream his father Shah Abdur Rahim saw the Holy Prophet giving him two pieces

of his hair. When he awoke he found these two pieces of hair and the four miraculous qualities were present. Whenever blessings on the Prophet were recited, the entangled pieces of hair would stand upright. After the recitation they would once again become entangled.

* * * *

Taking *bai'at* from a Sufi Shaykh, a *Pir-O-Murshid*, is one of the most important and serious steps that one can take in life. It is not to be taken lightly, so great are the implications of the *bai'at*. The *murid's* pledging allegiance to the *Murshid* carries immense responsibilities for both *Murshid* and *murid*. The *murid* is the one who wants knowledge or unconditional Love of Allah and the *Murshid* is the guide who will show him the way to attain it. Having been connected to my first *Tariqa* for many years I was well aware of the high degree of steadfastness and devotion that a *murid* is required to have and maintain. So, the step to renew my *bai'at* with another *Pir-O-Murshid* was one that I carefully and cautiously considered for a long time. I dared not enter into a spiritual bond without total certainty. Within my heart I already knew that Mehmood's *Pir-O-Murshid*, Baba 'Abdul Razzaq Raza Shakoori was my *Pir-O-Murshid* too, though I had not yet taken *bai'at* from him. My head and heart had to come together in utter agreement, without any doubts or misgivings. However, in South Africa when several people asked, 'Who is your *Murshid*?' I unhesitatingly answered that it was Baba*ji*.

Whilst in Durban I had the honour of spending a few private hours with Shah Irshad Soofie's *Pir-O-Murshid*, Hazrat Ghulam Muhayyuddin Qazi Habibi. This 'man of light' had been present at Durban Airport on the day of my arrival and he had also been present at the *Urs* Celebrations in Pietermaritzburg, and at one of my 'talks' he had been present in the adjoining room, listening. On this day when we were to spend those vitally important hours together, we met at the *Mazar* of Soofie Saheb, where Hazrat Saheb had been sitting deep in meditation. He took me to another *Mazar* for *du'as* and salaams and then to his apartment in the city where we had tea with his family. We then sat in his *astana*, the small room of devotion and prayer.

Hazrat Saheb pulled aside a veil on the wall to reveal a photograph of a radiant human being, his own *Pir-O-Murshid*. I had seen this photo before at Shah Irshad's home. It was the luminous face of Hazrat Shah Ibrahim Soofie, the *wali* whose *Mazar* is in Ajmer Sharif, the Saint

who dared not enter Khwaja Saheb's *Mazar* because of the awe-inspiring presence of spiritual beings from the Unseen Realm.

Guarded and protected in a curtained and veiled cabinet in the corner of Hazrat Saheb's *astana* was a Blessed Hair of the Holy Prophet. We were surrounded by and immersed in so much *barakat*, spiritual energy. Hazrat Saheb spoke gently and reassuringly to me. Being a man of *kashf*, unveiling, and *basirah*, insight, he knew my situation and the caution with which I was approaching my renewed *bai'at*. Quickly he dispelled my worries when, upon my mention of the name Baba 'Abdul Razzaq Raza Shakoori, he indicated that Baba*ji* was indeed my *Pir-O-Murshid*.

In Johannesburg I was again privileged to sit privately with Shaykh Chopdat of the Sultan Bahu Sufi Centre, where I was scheduled to talk with the ladies. The Shaykh is a *khalifa* in the Sarwari-Qadiri *Silsila*. The story behind the Sultan Bahu Mosque, Sufi Centre and Orphanage is truly wonderful but it is beyond the scope of this present book. It deserves a study in itself, which hopefully one of the Shaykh's *murids* will undertake. Shaykh Chopdat, a small and humble *faqir*, appeared quite incongruous sitting amidst the carpets and sofas of the luxurious Sufi Centre. Dressed in simple *shalwar qamiz* with a prayer cap atop his long hair the Shaykh and I discussed many things. And when I mentioned Baba 'Abdul Razzaq Raza Shakoori he too indicated that Baba*ji* was my *Pir-O-Murshid*.

Yet, even after all these signs, I still needed a further indication, confirmation. I was indeed very cautious. Back in Karachi I asked a friend, a German Muslim man, to take me to the *Mazar* of his Chishti *Pir-O-Murshid* in Sakhi Hasan Cemetery. My German friend had embraced Islam back in the 1970s and become the *murid* of Hazrat Shahidullah Faridi, the English Chishti Shaykh. It was another of Hazrat Shahidullah's *murids* who, four years earlier, had given me that yellow and red sacred thread on my initial visit to Pakistan, the man who had said, 'You are a Chishti!'

As I sat in contemplation at the *Mazar* of Hazrat Shahidullah Faridi I received a total verification of the correctness of my resolve to take *bai'at*. Babaji's face appeared before me, completely unbidden. I did not need any more signs or indications. All I had to do was wait till the 'call' came from Babaji!

* * * *

Early one Sunday morning in August, I catch a rickshaw to Babaji's *astana*. Not his tiny *astana* of days gone by. The new *astana*, situated only a few hundred metres from the former one, is spacious and sunny. A large tree grows in the middle of the courtyard. The perfect setting for *qawwali mehfils*! There are many rooms, for sisters to gather and brothers to talk and rest, a kitchen and washrooms. And at one end of the courtyard is a long room with a high ceiling. This is Babaji's room. The familiar photos cover the walls with *chadars* enclosed in glass cabinets. Green walls and furnishings, a tranquil and truly joyous atmosphere pervades this new *astana* just as it did the old! And for all its spaciousness it still is the simple and humble *astana* of a true *faqir*.

Babaji has numerous *murids*, some extremely wealthy and many exceedingly poor, all devoted to his service. Throughout the years the wealthy *murids* have again and again offered their large homes to Babaji who, being a *faqir* and utterly detached from the things of this world, has always declined. Yet, it was the *murids* who purchased this new *astana*, renovating and decorating it through their overflowing love of their *Pir-O-Murshid*.

Babaji is lying on a *charpoy* under the shady tree when I enter the new courtyard. I give salaams to some brothers who indicate that it is in order for me to go directly to Babaji. Such caution must be observed and permission granted from older *murids* because, as yet, I am not Babaji's *murid*.

Outside in the lanes it is hot and sticky. Here, inside the *astana* the sun's rays filter gently through the lush growth of the solitary tree, bathing the courtyard in a delicate light. Such a pleasant setting, gentle on the eyes. But...Babaji is now blind! Months earlier after an operation to remove cataracts he lost his outer sight. Unable to see his new *astana* yet seeing with his inner eye, the eye of the heart, the *basira*, seeing what none of us can see!

I kiss Babaji's extended right hand, lean close to his ear and softly whisper the words asking to take *bai'at* from him. He holds my hand tightly and replies,

'Where is Mehmood? When is he coming?'

'Next week Babaji! Should Mehmood be with me? Do you want Mehmood to be here for my *bai'at*?'

'Yes, don't worry about anything. Wait till Mehmood comes.'

* * * *

It is 19 September 2002. It is Thursday, a special day. The 11th of Rajab, a special date in a special month, the month of Khwaja Saheb's *Urs*. Five years have passed since I first saw Baba 'Abdul Razzaq Raza Shakoori Malangi Chishti on a video recording as I sat in a tenth floor apartment in the Australian city of Brisbane. With a degree of urgency Mehmood takes me to Babaji. When the inner call comes nothing can deter one from going, nothing can keep one away!

A few sisters sit in their room writing *tawiz* and saying *zikr* on their prayer beads whilst brothers chat quietly on a mat in the shaded courtyard. Babaji beckons me to sit with him on the *charpoy*. Mehmood is nearby as Babaji had wished. The moment for my *bai'at* has arrived!

'You know what is *Tasawwur*?

'Yes Babaji.'

'You must practice *Tasawwur*. You must keep my face always in your heart!'

'Babaji, you have been in my heart for over five years!'

And Babaji smiles radiantly as he clasps my hand even more tightly in his.

Perhaps this is the reason why Gharib Nawaz, Khwaja Mu'inuddin Chishti didn't invite us to his *Urs* in Ajmer Sharif in this year of 2002!

* * * *

The thread, a Chishti thread, running through my life, pulling me from Australia to Pakistan across the ocean of *'ishq* and into the hearts of the Chishtis! Each and every *murid* in each and every Sufi *Silsila* all over the world will have his or her unique story about the unfolding of the spiritual connection to the *Silsila*. The Sufi Path is a living reality, the unfolding continuous.

* * * *

We were returning to Karachi after the *Urs* Celebrations of Qazi Baba in Sukkur. Babaji and about eighty of his *murids* took over one entire carriage of the train. A blessed *ziyarat* it had been, to one of Babaji's own *Pir-O-Murshids*.

Usually I am thoroughly disenchanted on the return train journey to Karachi. Coming back from the fervour of an *Urs* in Pakpattan Sharif,

or from India after the inexpressible joy of Khwaja Saheb's *Darbar* in Ajmer Sharif and the intimate spiritual connection at the *Mazar* of Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya in Delhi. Always my spirits are low as the train descends further and further south into Sindh and then to Karachi, back to the familiar. But this train journey from Sukkur after the *Urs* of Qazi Baba is quite different. Instead of the despondency of former returns I now experience a subtle elation and sense of inner joy.

Babaji's compartment has been prepared at one end of the carriage. Voluminous soft bedding swathed in green velvet and bulbous cushions similarly adorned are spread over hard Pakistan Railways seats, rendering the dismal space into a place of delightful intimacy and strange appeal.

One hour into the journey, after our meal and just as Mehmood has spread a cloth on the floor for a night of much-needed sleep, Babaji summons him to his presence. The harmonium is lifted from the baggage rack. Ahh! There is to be a *mehfil*, a very private, very exclusive and extremely important *mehfil*—on the train as we travel south. Quickly I take my camera from my bag.

The glorious sound of the voice calls me, beckons me, attracts and intoxicates me! I cannot stay away. These are treasured moments, moments to be captured! Impossible to capture but at least these moments can be recorded and placed in my book that someone may read someday!

And so it was. There on a train, travelling at night through interior Sindh, there I witnessed, in all its heart-melting beauty, the transmission of divine inspiration from the heart of Baba 'Abdul Razzaq Raza Shakoori Chishti to the heart of his *murid* and *khalifa*, the *dervish qawwal* Mehmood 'Majnun' Ghaznavi Sabri.

Babaji the Master, his outer eyes now blind but his inner eye, his *basira*, wide-open and seeing the unspeakably beautiful visions of the Unseen Realm. Translating his inner visions into musical notes of subtle poignancy he transfers the inspirational melodies to Mehmood's heart and ears. Now it is Babaji who sings and Mehmood who listens. Their heads touching, their hearts connected. Babaji holds Mehmood's hand in his own. Babaji passes the hints, the subtle influences and allusions to Mehmood who then finds the perfect *raga* within his own self. Babaji's smile of utter joy illuminates the entire carriage and all of our hearts! Never have I seen Babaji more beautiful!

Then with three strong hard affectionate punches in the middle of Mehmood's back, Babaji seals the transmission. Babaji is pleased, so

pleased. Pure satisfaction and delight emanate from him as he leans back on the green cushions. Babaji is pleased with his *qawwal khalifa*. How blessed is Mehmood! And how blessed Amatullah to be there!

* * * *

Perhaps this was the weaving of that Chishti thread into the amazing multi-coloured tapestry of my attraction and connection to the great Chishti Saints of the Subcontinent and to their lovers. I had come to Pakistan ostensibly to investigate and analyse the descent of divine inspiration into the heart of the Sufi *qawwal* Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri. But here I was witnessing the transmission and directly experiencing the profound beauty and effect of such inspiration upon his youngest brother! And this I did during those precious hours on a train travelling south in the darkness of a Pakistani night.

The descent of divine inspiration was woven into the voice of Mehmood Ghaznavi Sabri which was woven through and through with the delicate yet unbreakable golden threads of the Chishti *Silsila* and the Saints' messages of love to humanity.

November 2004. We have returned to India. On this, our first day in Delhi, we make *ziyarat* to the Mazar of Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya. In my arms I am carrying a golden *chadar* from the humble white marble grave of Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri in Karachi. The *Darbar* is filled with devotees. Friday prayers have just finished. As Mehmood unfolds and tenderly spreads the golden *chadar* over the Mazar. hundreds of voices start singing salaams and praises to the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Perfect moment. This is the same golden *chadar* that had been graciously draped over my shoulders at Haji Saheb's fourth *Urs*. Now, nearly seven years later, Mehmood spreads it over the Saint of Delhi, a gift of love, an offering of devotion from Haji Ghulam Farid Sabri, Mehmood and me. Perfect moment!

Having said so much I realise,
there's really nothing to say!
Nothing to write!
Just the music
And the voice,
And—the drowning!

Glossary

ALLAH: The Supreme Name of God.

adab: Spiritual courtesy

ahwal: Spiritual states

'alam-i khayal: The Realm of Imagination

'arif: a knower (of Allah)

'ashiq: a lover (of Allah)

'ashiq-e Rasul: Lover of Rasulullah, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

astana: a place set aside for devotion and spiritual converse and companionship

azan: the Call to Prayer

ba'ait: Oath of allegiance or bond between a disciple (*murid*) and her/his spiritual master (*Pir-O-Murshid*)

bandarwala: generally adolescent boys who, with pet monkeys, seek alms in the city streets of Pakistan.

barakat (barkat, barakah) : Spiritual blessing or spiritual energy that flows through everything but is strongest within spiritual human beings and sacred places.

basirat (basira): the inner eye (or eye of the heart) that perceives the Unseen Realm.

burqa: Full length veil worn by some Muslim women.

chadar: a sheet of cloth that is spread as an act of devotion and love over the Mazar of a Sufi Saint. *Chadars* range from plain ones on cotton cloth to ornately decorated ones on brocade and velvet.

chai wala: A seller of tea.

charpoy: simple four-legged bed of wood and woven hemp

chilla: a forty-day spiritual retreat spent in prayer, fasting and *zikr*, under the guidance of a Pir-O-Murshid. Also the name of the place where a saint undertook a *chilla*.

chilla-i-Ma'kus: Forty-day spiritual retreat in which the devotee fasts and recites *zikr* in an inverted, hanging position.

chundri: Technique of tie-dyed cloth specific to Rajasthan.

darbar: court of a Sufi Saint

dargah: Shrine and adjoining buildings constructed around the tomb of a Sufi Saint,

Day of Alast: The Primordial Covenant, in Pre-eternity, between ALLAH and the souls of all the sons and daughters of Adam. The Sufis refer to this as the day of *Alast*.

dervish: Literally, 'one who seeks doors'. The name *dervish* refers to the members of a Sufi community.

dhamal: Ecstatic dance to the beat of drums specific to the Mazar of Hazrat Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sehwan Sharif, Sindh.

dholak: a barrel-shaped drum used in *qawwali*

diwani: Crazy, mad. An ecstatic engulfed in love of the Divinity and/or a Sufi saint.

du'a: Personal prayer of supplication

dunya: The physical world. This life. In *Tasawwuf* (Sufism) *dunya* refers to the things of this world that distract one from the Remembrance of Allah.

faizan: Spiritual overflowing or emanation through which Knowledge of Divinity is bestowed.

faqir: The one who is poor and needy towards Allah.

faqirni: female *faqir*

fana: self-annihilation or self-effacement, passing away from self. In *Tasawwuf* the three stages of *fana* are: *fana fi-sh-Shaykh*, annihilation in the qualities of the *shaykh*, the spiritual master; *fana fi-r-Rasul*: annihilation in the qualities of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH); and finally *fana fi'llah*, annihilation in *Allah*.

Fatiha: the Opening Chapter of the Holy Qur'an.

fikr: Reflection or the power of thought and cognition.

hadrah: literally 'presence'. The term also applies to a gathering where the collective *zikrullah* is performed. Also applies to a type of rhythmic dance performed by members of the Shadhiliyya Silsila.

Haj: The Pilgrimage to Mecca in Arabia. One of the five Pillars of Islam

hakim: practitioner of herbal medicine.

halwa: sweetness

hamd: A song or poem in Praise of Allah.

hujra: a small cell in which a devotee secludes her or himself for prayer and fasting

ihram: two pieces of unstitched white cloth worn by men when performing the pilgrimage to Mecca.

istiqamat: Spiritual steadfastness in the face of all events be they manifestations of Divine Beauty or Divine Majesty.

'ishq: Passionate, all-engulfing love

'ishq-e haqiqi: True Love of the Real, Allah

'ishq-e Muhammadi: Love of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)

jalwa: Society (according to Muhyiuddin Ibn al-'Arabi, the great Sufi Saint).

jihad: Holy War. In *Tasawwuf* Holy War is waged against the negative forces and energies within the self.

khadim: literally servant. Hereditary guardian and spiritual guide at the Shrine of Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti in Ajmer Sharif.

khalifa: a spiritual deputy of a Sufi Shaykh. Appointed by the Shaykh.

khalwa: spiritual seclusion.

khanqah: Shrine and adjoining buildings constructed around the tomb of a Sufi Saint

khilafat: The spiritual position held by a *khalifa;* the authority to act as a spiritual guide.

kismet (qismat): fate, destiny

lisan al-hal: The words uttered when one is under the influence of a spiritual state.

madrasa: school of Islamic learning.

majzub: One who is spiritual 'intoxicated' on Allah (God) and is therefore not in his senses. He is under the powerful influence of Divine attraction.

makam: A place once visited by a Sufi saint.

makr: deception.

malang: One who has turned away from the things of this world to devote his/herself to Allah.

manqabat: song or poem in Praise of the Sufi saints

ma'rifat: Knowledge of the Divinity.

mazar: Shrine of a Sufi saint.

mehfil: spiritual assembly

mehfil-e-sama': spiritual assembly to partake of qawwali.
muezzin: the one who calls the faithful to prayers.
muhabbat (mahabbat): The lofty, pure and unconditional love of Allah.
mujahada: spiritual struggle or warfare against the lower self.
muraqaba: vigilant concentration, with all the power of mind and thought and imagination, to examine one's heart.
murid: spiritual seeker and disciple of a Sufi Shaykh. *Murid* literally means, 'the one who desires (Allah).'
murshid: Also called *Pir-O-Murshid, Shaykh*. He is the spiritual Master who will guide his *murids* along the Path of Return to their Source in Allah.
muwahhid: One who declares the Divine Unity, the Oneness.
na'at: song or poem in Praise of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).
nafs: the self
nafs al-ammara: the lower self
namaz: Ritual prayer
nazrana: The formal offering of money in a qawwali assembly.
Pir-o-Murshid: See *murshid*
qalandar: a mystic of high spiritual rank.
qawwal: Sufi singer
qawwali: Indo-Pakistani Sufi music.
qazi: Islamic judge
qurbani: ritual sacrifice
Rahmat: The Boundless Divine Mercy and Compassion
raga: systemized melodic pattern
raqs: ecstatic dance
riyada: ascetic discipline
ruhani-bai'at: Spiritual allegiance between a Sufi Master who has passed away and therefore dwells in the spiritual realm and a *murid* in this world. The Allegiance takes place in the spiritual realm and may be experienced in a dream.
sabr: Perfect patience in a state of unconditional surrender to the Will of Allah.
sajjada nashin: 'the one seated on the prayer carpet'. The official successor to a Saint's shrine.
sama': The spiritual concert or audition where spiritual music is used as a means to open the heart to inrushes of knowledge and awareness.

Shab-e Ba'arat: The Night of Destiny when destinies are set for the coming year.
Shahnai: wind musical instrument
Shari'at: the Sacred Law of Islam
shijra: spiritual genealogical tree of a Sufi Order.
silsila: The spiritual chain of a Sufi Order.
SubhanAllah: 'Glory be to Allah'.
surma: grey or black powder applied around the eyes. Also known as *kohl*.
tabarruk: blessed food offered and dedicated to a Saint and then distributed publicly.
tariqa: The Way or Path. The spiritual Path of *Tasawwuf* (Sufism)
tasawwuf: The spiritual doctrines and methods of self purification; the art of transforming the lower self into the Higher Self.
tasawwur: Conceptualization and visualization of the Sufi Master.
tasbih: prayer beads, usually of 100 or 1000 beads.
tawhid: Divine Unity or Oneness.
tawiz: spiritual amulet worn for protection and to cure spiritual and physical ailments.
Urs: 'Wedding Day'. The joyful celebration, on a Saint's death day, of his final union with Allah.
wali (pl. awliya): friend
waliullah: A friend of Allah. In *Tasawwuf* (Sufism) the word saint is actually replaced by *wali* meaning friend. The Saint is a *wali*, a friend of Allah.
wajd: Spiritual ecstasy. Rapture. Trance.
warid: Divine inrush of Knowledge upon the heart.
zikr: Remembrance or Recollection. Rhythmic repetition of Divine Names and formulas used as a means to purify the heart.
zikrullah: The Remembrance of Allah.
ziyarat: visit to the Shrine of a Sufi saint.

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the LAMP *of* LOVE

JOURNEYING WITH THE SABRI BROTHERS

Amatullah Armstrong Chishti

This book recounts the unfolding of a dream and the journey that took the author from the midst of an Australian bushland paradise to the rapture of devotion at the Shrines of the Great Sufi Saints in Pakistan and India. It is a story of the yearning and searching for the Beloved, a story of love and loneliness.

The book tells of the unfolding of the author's spiritual connection to the Sufi saints of the Indo-Pak subcontinent and to Pakistan's legendary *qawwals*, the Sabri Brothers. The narrative describes how she followed a dream that led to the discovery of spiritual treasures in both Pakistan and India, and of her direct experience of being engulfed in the ecstatic music of the Sabri Brothers.

The author elaborates upon the Sufi spiritual journey, highlighting the abysses and peaks encountered in the continuing search for higher knowledge. She records her impressions of life in Pakistan where she settled in order to immerse herself more deeply in *qawwali* and the Sufi traditions.

Amatullah Armstrong Chishti trained as an art teacher and ran her own art restoration business in Sydney, Australia. She also travelled to Japan, Russia, England, France, Tahiti, Easter Island, Chile and Brazil.

Amatullah's spiritual quest began in the early 1980s when she undertook a 5000 km bicycle journey from Paris, through France, Corsica and Sardinia to Tunisia in North Africa. She encountered Islam during this journey and formally embraced Islam in 1984 in the Algerian Sahara Desert.

She subsequently entered the Sufi Path and was initiated into the Sufi *tariqa*. The author then returned to university in Australia and was awarded a Postgraduate degree in 1997. Her thesis was entitled 'The Artist Transformed: Sufi Views on the Development of the Self and Art'. Between 1991 and 1995 she also wrote and published four books on her personal experience within Sufism and Islam.

A spiritual traveller connected to the Chishti Silsila, she left Australia in 1998 and is now working with Mehmood Sabri to transmit the Sufi message in Pakistan and abroad.